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THE FABULOUS TC RICHARDS

by Dianne Green

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Babe Richards' parents were the legendary T.C. and Bernadine Richards. Known as the "T.C.s", the couple brought elegance and fun to the business and social scene of Whitehorse for nearly 40 years.

Thomas Cecil Richards was born in 1898 in Lester, England. He came to Whitehorse in 1915 from the B.C. interior, where he had been a butcher. In 1918 he married Bernadine Piper, one of the most beautiful and accomplished members of her young social set.

Born in West Plains, Missouri in 1898, Bernadine arrived in the Yukon with her parents in 1902. The move was made with assistance from her grandfather, Frank Bigger who operated a trading post at Dyea, Alaska, a point of entry during the gold rush. After the Skagway to Whitehorse railway was built, Bigger and his wife moved to Whitehorse where he built a store. (City council demolished the tiny building on First Avenue, known as the "Sewell House", several years ago.) In 1917 the Biggers moved to Washington State where they operated a profitable greenhouse business.

As the manager of the Whitehorse branch of P. Burns and Company Ltd., a meat company that came to the Yukon with the gold rush, T.C. demonstrated his star qualities when he oversaw the first cattle drive into the Mayo area in 1921. The silver mines in the region were just starting up and the mining camps were out of fresh meat and moose was scarce.

In late August, P. Burns and Company Ltd., shipped 30 head of cattle aboard the SS White Horse down the Yukon River to Fort Selkirk. From there, a party of four men on horseback, which included T.C., two cowboys and an Indian guide, drove the cattle overland from Pelly to Mayo.

Although it was only September, the party encountered a snowstorm during which four head of cattle were lost. For the last 20 miles of the trail there was practically no grass or other feed on which the animals could graze. One night the cattle broke into the men's food supplies and ate everything except some tea and flour. The party subsisted on tea and bannock until the flour gave out; then they lived on tea and rabbit.

On September 23, 1921, the *Whitehorse Star* reported, "These are the first cattle driven into the Mayo country and from that standpoint the trip is an historic one. Mr. Richards and

others in his party are in fine condition despite the hardships of the trip."

In 1921, T.C. inaugurated a winter tractor-train freight and passenger service to Dawson. The old horse stage took five days with overnight stops at roadhouses--now the freezing passengers, huddled on bales of freight, made the trip in three. If they dared complain T.C. would slay, "Well, you wanted to get there fast didn't you?"

By 1935, T.C. and his business partner, W.L. "Deacon" Phelps, had the Whitehorse-Dawson mail contract and were commended in the *Whitehorse Star* on the "speedy type of service they are inaugurating of late." Their company was called, "Klondike Airways", although it never owned an airplane. In summer, two Ford V8 trucks made the trip over the old stage coach trail from Whitehorse to Dawson in two and a half days.

In winter the mail was carried by cat trains and, by 1936, new 'triple assembly snowmobiles', which covered the distance in 28 hours. Chief mechanic, Slim Koebke, was credited for these highly modern snowmobiles which he built in the company's own shops.

T.C. Richards was inducted posthumously into the Yukon Transportation Hall of Fame in 1998. While his contributions to the evolution of transportation in the territory are considerable, perhaps he is best known as the owner of The Whitehorse Inn.

Torn down in 1979, The Whitehorse Inn had been a popular social centre since the 1920s. Its famous "Snake Room" was the scene of many a card game. In 1937, hotel owners Ken and Mack Yoshida were playing high-stakes poker with some of the town's most affluent businessmen. T.C. Richards was sitting in, as he often did. T.C. won the game and used his winnings--\$20,000--as a down payment on the hotel. The Yoshidas returned to Tokyo and T.C. took over what would become his most successful business venture.

T.C. often managed to combine business and pleasure, but there were many times when he put business aside in favour of what he considered a plain old good time. He had a great love for big cars and as early as the spring of 1920 was sporting a handsome new Dodge, patiently waiting for the snow to disappear and the roads to dry up for joy riding.

He was an exceptionally courteous man and always tipped his hat to the ladies. T.C. always wore a white Stetson but he had a great love for hats of any style. On one occasion in Atlin, B.C. he took the old hat off every man who walked into Sands' store, tossed it into the stove and bought him a new expensive one. At the end of this caper he'd bought the whole stock of hats at Sands and "paid an awful price for the lot."

The T.C.s had a large cottage at Marsh Lake where the welcome mat was always out. Mrs. T.C. prepared tubs of salads, cold cuts, all the gourmet fixings one could wish for--and no matter what your preference in drinks, they had lots of it.

"On one occasion, while loading a case of fine Scotch whisky into the trunk of his car, he told passing friends, 'I'm going out the cabin alone for a few days--I want to taper off.' He was a champion elbowbender in a town full of experts and he never made any bones about it," one old friend reminisced for The *Whitehorse Star* in 1975.

It appears that Bernadine Richards was content to play a supporting role in the lives of her husband and children. She took an interest in the hotel and spent many hours making sure that the cleaning staff did their jobs properly. The family's log home on Third and Steele

streets is a tribute to her love of luxury and her good taste. Bernadine was a perfect hostess and guests in her home knew that they were very lucky indeed.

The epitome of style and fashion, Bernadine set the bar very high for her daughter, who later opened a dress shop. Babe remembers having her photo taken on a Vancouver street while she was wearing slacks. She made sure that her mother never saw the photo as she knew she would not approve.

In Babe's living room a photo portrait of Bernadine shows a stunning woman with sad eyes. It was taken after the death of her oldest son, Cecil, in 1942. "After that mother never was the same," Babe says. Bernadine Richards died in Whitehorse in 1956. T.C. joined his wife and son in death in 1961.

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See related article *Yukon Chamber of Mines' Presence Dates Back to 1943*.

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