

# THE CHILKOOT TRAIL THEN AND NOW

BY DOW V. BAXTER

*professor of wood technology at the University of Michigan. Old photographs courtesy University of Washington Library, others by the author unless credited.*

HAVE YOU ever wondered what the once proclaimed death-dealing trail of Klondike gold rush days looks like now? Sixty-five years later the trail presents a brighter side—so we found while continuing a continental journey of studies of forest fungi.

In place of a Yukon stove, a sack of flour, some rice, beans, and a .38 revolver, Al Railsback, graduate student in botany at the University of Vermont, and I were packing specimens, bed rolls, concentrated dried food, and heavy camera equipment out of Sheep Camp. On the red side of the ledger, we returned to Dyea and Skagway without a single nugget in our pokes.

To thousands of fortune hunters of '97 and '98, Sheep Camp was a city of tents, a few cabins, saloons, and one, two or many hotels, depending upon the month they reached the settlement. The first and foremost of these was the Seattle Hotel.

"Ours, the Seattle," explained Ben Card, now 84 years old and living in Seattle, Washington, "was a 12 by 14 tent stretched over a framework of logs. We covered the ground with poles and when we got time to whipsaw some lumber, we floored them over.

"Dad and mother operated the Seattle, but the Cards always credited mother for packing the sock for the family. At seventeen, I got me a horse; did some 'packing' and kept our restaurant going by buying food from licked stampeders. Before leaving the hotel of a morning, I'd take a hundred, maybe two hundred dollars from our valise. Then I'd keep an eye open for the not-too-hard-to-find discouraged, and often sick, newcomer who wanted to sell his outfit before turning his back on the north.

"The day would begin early. Dad would roll out of bed about three in the morning, get the fire going and the mush water on. Then mother would get up and start breakfast. When Dad flipped the tent flaps back, Sheep Camp knew that our restaurant was open for business.

"Our rooming accommodation consisted of bunks three tiers high. Each bunk was provided with straw and one blanket. We charged a dollar for each bunk. When these were filled, late comers would pay a dollar, furnish their

own blanket and sleep on the floor—but out of the weather.

"Man-o-man," Ben would say, "time was scarce. For about three months there we didn't have time to even count our money. But we knew that the valise was full of gold, some paper, and a little silver and we knew, too, that our suitcase was partly filled."

Ben, now expressing more than usual happiness with his eyes, would continue: "Your asking about the Trail makes me re-live Sheep Camp. I've wished thousands of times I could go back."

To the world today, Sheep Camp means nothing. Yet it was Sheep Camp and the rough stretch of four or five miles beyond to the summit that provided the lasting image of a line of burdened fortune-seekers silhouetted against the snow as they plodded up to the Chilkoot Pass. Steps had been cut in the icy slope, Ben explained to me, and these literally led to heaven for some, while others landed in the gold creeks of the Klondike.

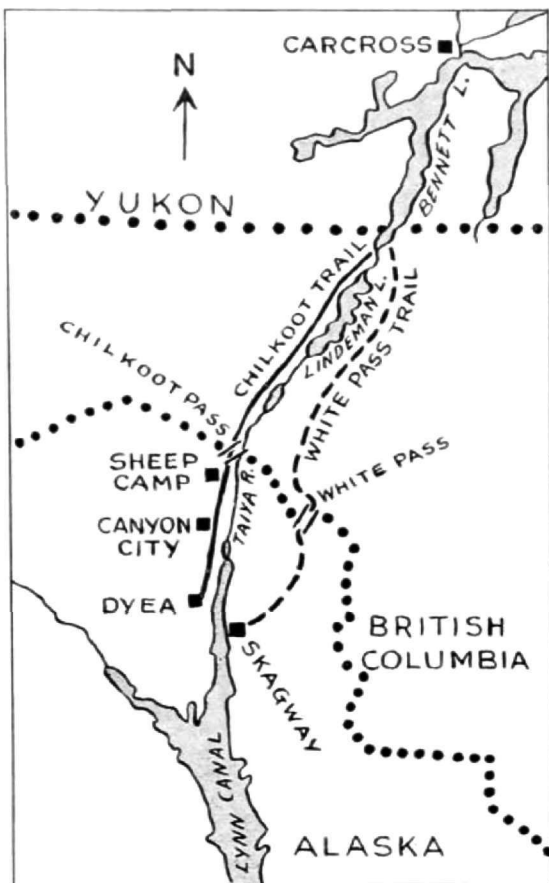
But in spite of the hardships of the trail, there was inspiration in the news coming out of the hills.

"Will find gold in slabs" was headlined back in Seattle in the *Daily Times* of 16 September 1897. The article quoted a Californian who planned to return north to search for the mother lode. "Somewhere up in the mountains where the Klondike gold has come from, I believe that, in years to come, quartz ledges will be discovered that will carry the yellow metal, not in strings, but in slabs." In Dyea, Alaska, beginning of the trail, the headline "Hope for All" was printed in the newspaper dated 26 March 1898.

*The final ascent to Chilkoot Pass. At this camp known as The Scales packs were readjusted for the gruelling climb to the summit. To the left of the line of laden climbers are ledges where the exhausted could step off the trail and rest. Having deposited their loads at the top the men slid back to the camp for more of their goods, marked by a stake so they could be found beneath the snow. The streak to the right of the climbing men is the groove worn by those making a quick descent.*



1897-8



*A pack train of 1897 in Dyea Canyon not far from Canyon City. Damage to the trees that have not been felled is noticeable. The modern photograph, below, shows glacier and forest below Canyon City, about five miles from Dyea.*

Packers out of Dyea, according to Ben, would carry supplies weighing about one hundred pounds. "I used to pack about seventy-five. Horses would be loaded with approximately two hundred pounds. You see, a ton of supplies was required for entry into Canada by the Mounties stationed at the summit or borderline. This was a wise requirement because there wasn't much food in Dawson for the mushrooming population. Money was a

common article, but money wouldn't buy provisions."

Like any trail on the rainy coast-side of the mountains, the Dyea did not improve with use. Marshy and boggy stretches soon became sink holes. To be sure, some enterprising packers would stop long enough to throw down small logs to corduroy such muddy places. In fact, I've read that charges were levied for the privilege of traveling over such improved spots, as they were for using the stairs in the packed snow at the summit.

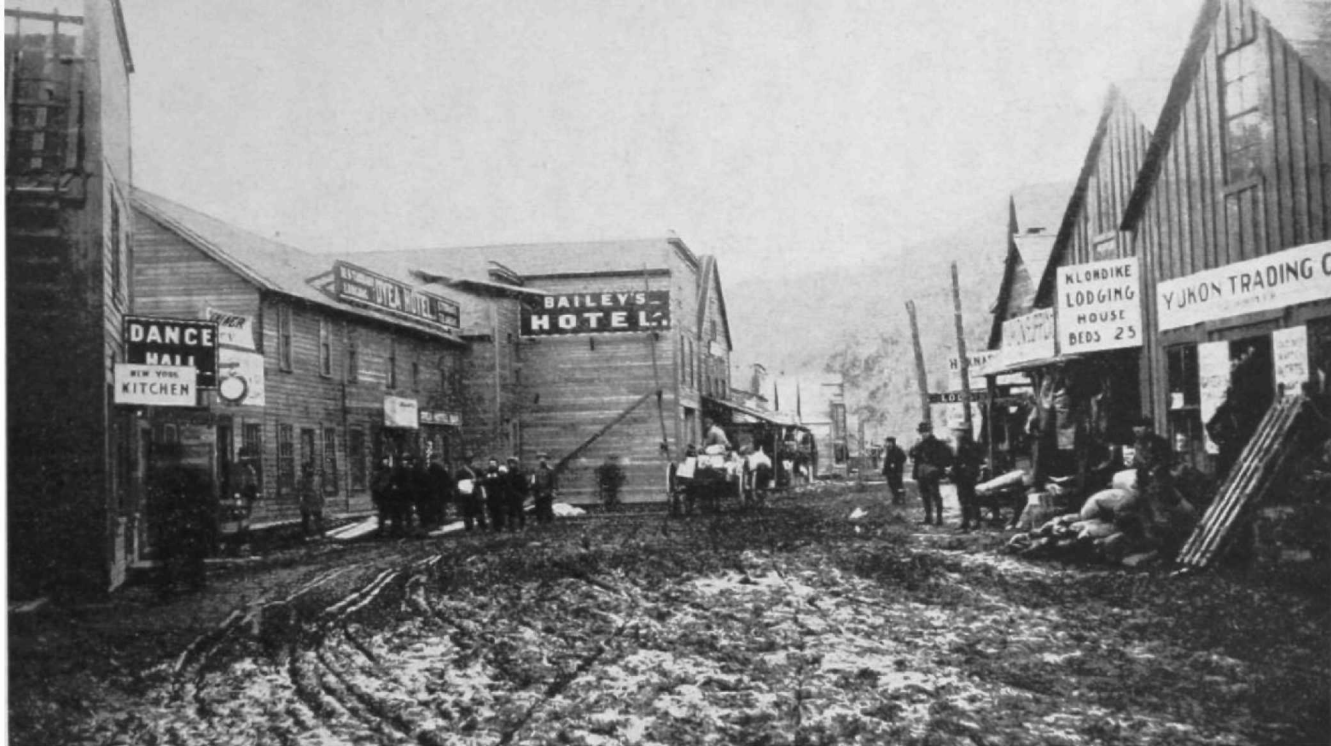
"I don't remember that," Ben informed me, "but I'm saying that many of us would have been willing to pay such a toll. Stretches of soft mud were awful for the pack animals—the best friends of the sourdough."

Thinking of the trail of '97, Ben reflected: "An experience comes to mind I can't forget. I came upon a horse mired down to his neck in mud." His owner had given up thought of saving him, but he had taken care to keep his pack. Undoubtedly in relay fashion he had continued up the trail with his rescued duffle. "But there was that horse that I know had been a faithful partner to his master. When in need, it was the master who left him to die suffering. There was nothing I could do but to end his misery with my .38. Wish I could forget that time on the Dyea."

Today the relatively few who know the recently improved trail can be grateful to the Alaska government. In a co-operative project, employing young offenders, and

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*Trail Street, Dyea in '98, deep in mud and lined with lodging houses and stores.*

under the direction of Michael Leach, the Area Forester, the muddy sink-holes have been bridged or eliminated, brush cleared, and the old Chilkoot Trail made passable. There are plans to designate the trail a historical area, as has been done in Dyea.

If you enjoy hiking in remote places, plan to arrive at Skagway by steamer as Ben Card and thousands of others did when they came for gold. You will see the steep mountains rising from the water as they did then. The forest on the lower slopes, however, will be a different green. The new, fresh look at the old Skagway sites will be due to the fact that Alaska coast or Kenai birches and lodgepole pines have appeared following the destruction of the original darker green Sitka spruce and hemlocks by fire about 1912. Spruces and hemlocks are beginning to re-establish themselves under the protection of birches and pines.

The prospectors of '97 and '98 were presented with a choice of two trails that led to the gold fields. They could take the White Pass route directly out of Skagway or they could go by the Dyea (Chilkoot Pass) trail considered by thousands to be more practical. The Chilkoot trail originated at Dyea, then a flourishing town across the bay from Skagway at the head of the Lynn Canal. Although small boats anchored in the shallow Dyea inlet, steamers docked at Skagway. Passengers and freight had to cross by boat and barge. Today a mountain-road skirts the arm of the sea and connects Skagway with defunct Dyea.

We drove there, planning to begin our botanizing expedition near sea level. The only indication of old Dyea

was a weathered, sagging house by the side of the road, brought to life for us by tangled thickets of wild roses. We could not tell if we were walking down what once had been the main street lined with lodging houses and restaurants with "meals served at all hours," a welcome sign to many who had been living on hardtack and salt pork. A contemporary guide-book gushed: "A table d'hote dinner at \$1.50 is a cheap luxury, even though it consists of only bacon, beans, bread, coffee, a small piece of cheese and possibly a little dried fruit." Ben Card described it as petrified fruit! "This is a dinner worth going miles for—and if the happy miner is 'flush' he will spend an additional 50c for a drink and be transported to the seventh heaven of delight on the fumes of a 50c weed."

Now, spring flowers were in bloom everywhere. Not far from where so many pioneers lightered to shore, glistening, tiny, yellow buttercups glittered over the meadows to provide the colour at the near end of our rainbow trail. We knew that the other end arched over the Chilkoot Pass and down to the gold fields of '98. Even the galls on the lodgepole pines were yellow with spore-dust of a rust fungus. There were masses of iris with here and there pink shooting-stars that accented the blue of the iris.

As our road trail left the flats it wound itself about the tall pillars of a black cottonwood forest. These trees attain the greatest height of all our northern broadleaves and the trunks are often clear of branches for over half their length. No cathedral columns impress me so much as do the grey deeply corrugated trunks of the black cottonwood.

Much to our delight we observed the attractive Indian rice or fritillaria flowers growing in a small opening in the forest. These lily-like plants, with flowers ranging from wine-red to yellow-green, were called Indian rice because of the numerous small rice-like bulblets that occur in the ground and at the base of the single flower stalk.

The meandering forest-trail road now led us to the Taiya River. After photographing a big clump of rose-purple dwarf fireweed on a gravel bar we pulled ourselves across the river on a cable car.

"Man," Ben Card exclaimed to me later on, "if we'd had cables across the streams in '98, we could have made fortunes at every one of them. We forded the rivers in those earliest days of the trail's history. Hip boots, a part of our mining paraphernalia, saw plenty of use in wading. The water was always swift, cold and the rocks beneath slimy-slippery to make footing unsure. I always grabbed on to my pack horse's tail to steady myself.

"Others, too, found the crossing tricky. One day and when the water was a little higher than usual, two variety actresses or dance hall girls were among the strugglers trying to cross at the time I was packing across. They were scared and yelling for help. I ordered them to calm down if they wanted help from me. If they didn't do as I said, we would all be swept off our feet. Finally, I got those chippies across, but Man—I didn't mention another fording that had to be made later for I didn't want company a second time."

Across the river, the road continued along the valley-floor dominated by cottonwood and spruce forests. We should have been able to cover the first miles of level trail quickly, but time was lost because of our continually stopping to collect fungi and to photograph patches of ocean spray, several kinds of pyrolas, and elegantly blue monkshood.

Shortly after passing the old sawmill site, we spotted a recently made bear track and other tracks that were

*Indian rice or fritillaria* (left below) grows in clearings in the cottonwood forest (right) through which the first few miles of trail wind. The *Boschniakia glabra* (below) is a parasite on the roots of alders.

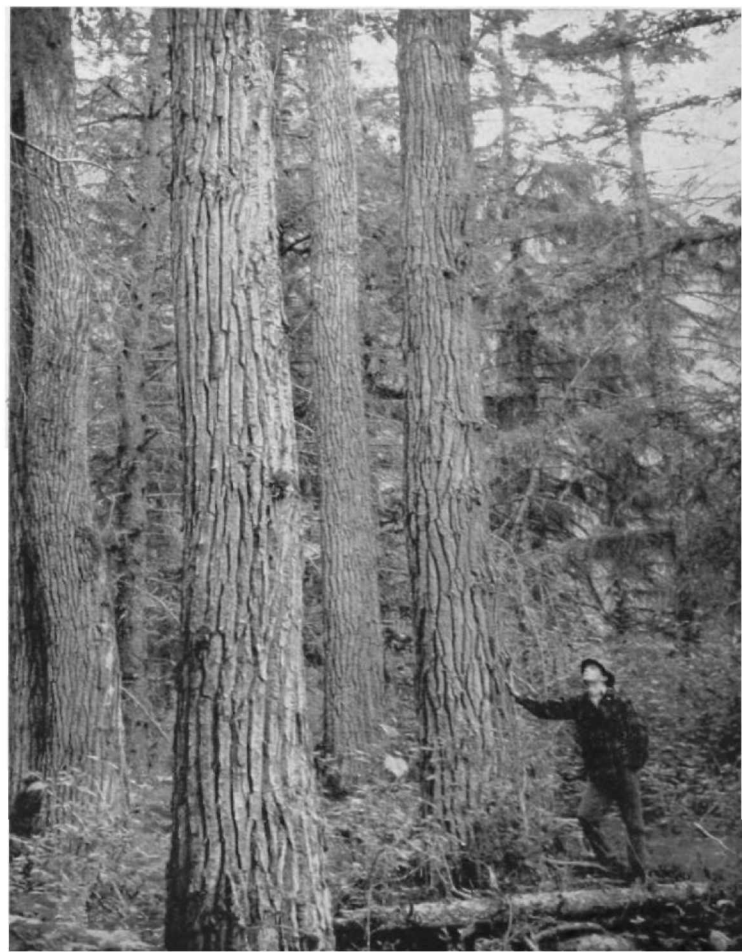
those of a wolf or a dog. In Ben Card's time they would probably have been dog tracks. "Don't forget man's friend the dog was there with us," he'd say with emphasis.

Ben, obviously, was partial to his Uncle Fred's (Fred Cavanaugh) wheel dog, Pilot. "A wheel dog," Ben would explain, "is one that worked next to the sled. Pilot always seemed to know what we were doing and why. Down on Sulphur Creek, for example, about sixty miles above Dawson, we were getting small logs out to build a cabin. My uncle fell in the river. Immediately Pilot plunged in as if to help.

"Uncle Fred grabbed some brush and climbed out, followed by Pilot who had jumped in after him. But as soon as the wet dog reached shore, he turned around and saw Uncle's cap floating down the river. In again Pilot plunged. Retrieving that cap, he dropped it at Uncle's feet, tail wagging and looking up as if to say—guess we are all here now."

Obviously, Ben loved dogs as well as horses. "With only one pack dog, I could divvy up my food with the dog, but with two—a fellow doesn't get enough to eat himself and neither do the dogs," Ben explained earnestly.

On our trail in 1963, Al and I spotted numerous cone-like flowering oddities that had sprung up among scattered alders growing on an old river bed below Canyon City. These spikes or cones were about six to ten inches tall and from a short distance away looked as if their





*Sheep Camp as it looked in April '98, stopping place for the Klondikers on the Chilkoot Trail. All that remains today of its cabins, saloons, and hotels are a few rotting timbers (below).*

surfaces had been shingled with brown scales. I have never seen so many of these "flowering cones" before on or off any of the Alaskan trails I've tramped. The Russian name of the plant, *Boschniakia*, is as odd as its structure. It is parasitic on alder roots.

I am told that not only did the Indians eat the roots, but that they are much sought after by bears. A friend who sampled the roots reported that they taste sweet, which probably appeals to the bears who are said to leave the flowers alone.

Having photographed the *Boschniakias* we were wandering along the trail when we saw a bear turning over some alder roots and ambling towards us searching the ground intently. We "froze" and remembered that Ben Card had been scared by a bear on this stretch. In both cases the bears left peacefully.

Soon, and after seven, eight, or nine miles (depending on where one considers mile zero in Dyea), we approached what had been Canyon City.

We had been following a section of the trail that had been described in a '98 Dyea newspaper as the go-as-you-please way. We zig-zagged sometimes towards the river and sometimes away from the water and through the forest. Finally we crossed the river on a newly made foot-bridge to the once populous city of tents, "comfortable hotels, restaurants, saloons, and business houses". Not a building or tent stands today, but the State plans to build an overnight cabin here\* for trail-hikers headed for Sheep Camp.

We poked around rusted-out stoves, tin cans, broken glass, English china, for souvenirs. Then shouldering our packs we retraced our steps over the river bridge to continue to Sheep Camp on the trail that suddenly turned upward. But before going far, we reached a spot where nature had provided a blanket of reindeer-moss (lichen) that covered the rocks and almost cushioned us into the idea of making our pause for breath an all-night stopover.

\*A log cabin with eight bunks and a stove, outdoor fireplace and table were completed in a clearing about half a mile from Canyon City site later in 1963.

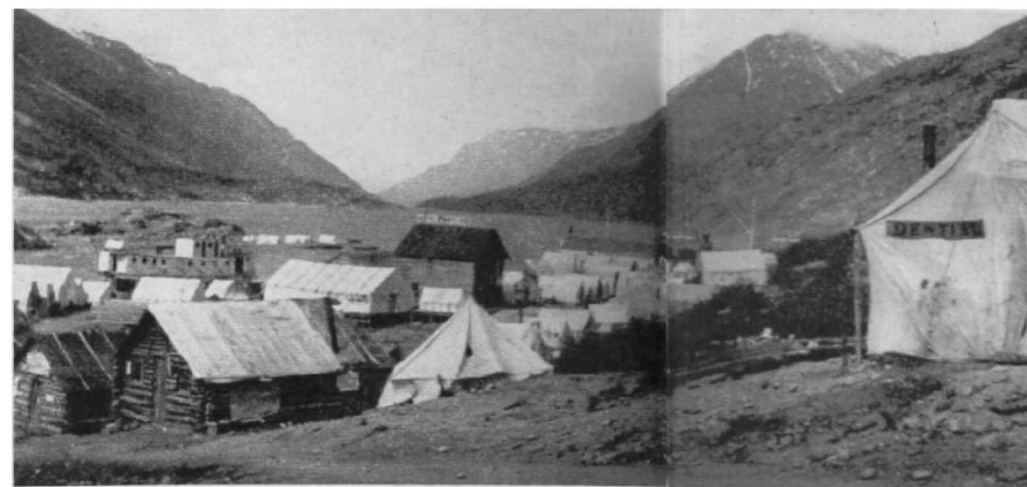


Overhead a bald eagle soared, cliff swallows darted after flying insects, and across the valley the eye was caught by a hanging glacier that had seemingly spilled over the mountain. Obviously the valley below owed much of its present form to ice of past times.

Alaskan glaciers were once larger than they are in their present position and subsequent recessions left bare ground that is now occupied with forests. The retreating glacier on the opposite side of the river provided a timetable picture of the forest that is developing on land being freed from ice. If one might generalize a bit, we could see that alders, willows, and cottonwoods, especially alders and cottonwoods, were among the first of the woody invaders to occupy the deglaciated areas opposite us. Farther from the ice-face in distance, and therefore farther removed in time from the period of ice coverage, Sitka spruce were the first of the conifers to appear, followed by hemlock.

We sat and mused on the patterns of succession in forest and fungi, and the modifying factors such as elevation and man-made catastrophes like a stampede for gold.

A look at Ben Card's early photographs of the trail convinces me that much of the timber along the way was skinned and debarked by the traffic and by felling of



*The old, unfinished church (left) still stands at Lake Bennett where the White Pass and Dyea Trails converged and where once there was a population of thousands (above). The sign on the nearest tent reads "Dentist."*



*Lindeman River near Lake Bennett.*

other trees for immediate use in 1897 and '98. Such injuries provided infection courts for the fungi that Al and I had been encountering all day, among them the red ring rot fungus and the Indian paint fungus used by the Tlinkits for facial painting. In other words, rot is appearing in the stands at an earlier age than if gold had not been found in the Yukon.

The long days of the northern early summer were not long enough for us under any circumstances and low hanging clouds were bringing darkness earlier this evening than usual. It was now about 9 p.m. and in the forest the trail was becoming dim. Soon after resuming our trek, we came to a one-cottonwood-log bridge that indicated that Sheep Camp was still ahead. After crossing the bridge we unpacked our bedrolls beneath some trees and ended the day.

Next morning arrived with a drizzle that quietly dripped from the tree crowns down into our faces to wake us early. Without comment, we rolled up the bags into the packs and made off for the Sheep Camp that we could not find the previous night.

Within a mile we sighted the newly built log cabin—the only structure in Sheep Camp—a sight that gave us a thrill probably akin to that experienced by the ninety-eighters when they approached the Hotel Seattle. We liked the natural (but not permanent) red stain of the recently peeled cottonwood logs and we liked the thought of having breakfast in dry quarters. Al made a fire in the '98 stove that had been rescued by the 1963 trail blazers and cooked our powdered vegetable-beef soup for an appetizer.

Sixty-five years away from the old trail of '98 and the Seattle Hotel made a big difference in the demand for

bunks. Al and I were the only occupants of the cabin, the only people in Sheep Camp. Later, when I was telling Ben Card of the welcome quarters available today, of bunks to spare, and the clean camp ground he listened intently, rubbed his nose, and remarked:

"Did I tell you about the time my good mother was disturbed almost to the brink of swearing in our overly crowded Seattle Hotel? Have I mentioned the story of the lousy preacher?"

"Our Seattle Hotel bunks were filled and all floor space was taken by paying stampedeers. Man—there wasn't any room to walk. Then a preacher showed up; he said he was a preacher and he said he was sick. Mother's heart strings were tugged so finally she told him to crawl in my bunk. When I crawled out the next morning, Man—I wasn't fit to pack. Mother diagnosed my ailment and Holy Smokes! It was lice! 'You got us clean people lousy. Get out you lousy preacher', Mother warned the stranger in no uncertain terms, 'and make sure you don't come back'.

"Mother knew we kept a .38 in bed, loaded and available, but neither she nor anyone of us ever had to use it for protection. In fact I've never seen anyone shot, but I've come close."

Then Ben went on to tell me about the gamblers coming over to the Chilkoot after their gangleader. Soapy Smith, had been killed in Skagway, of their shell game that his father had ended—just outside the Seattle Hotel; and of the time when the citizens of Sheep Camp ran the thief out of town, the thief having stolen another man's bed.

The worst tragedy created by nature happened above Sheep Camp on 3 April 1898. Today, tombstone-evidence

in the "Slide Cemetery" back in Dyea emphasizes the disastrous avalanche that buried over sixty people on the trail.

Prospectors must have experienced a feeling of triumph upon winning the summit, 3,700 feet above Dyea. Although the longer part of the journey lay ahead, these fortune hunters could look forward to some relatively easy sledding during the winter and to boat travel during the summer. They could build their boats upon reaching Lake Lindeman, or they could push on a few miles past the Lindeman River to Lake Bennett. The mighty Yukon River to Dawson was accessible from Lake Bennett.

Ben told of his scow trip down Lake Bennett. "I was headed for Dawson on a scow with domestic sheep. Man—I was afraid that a bear prowling along shore might smell those sheep, swim out and climb aboard. A shot wouldn't do any good. If a shot had been fired from the scow, we'd loose the sheep anyway. They'd jump overboard into the lake."

Ben's tale reminded me to ask about another point that puzzled me. Did the sudden appearance of thousands of people in the wilderness deplete the game to such an extent that the stampedeers could not depend upon living off the country?

"I don't think that the ninety-eighters had anything to do with the game that was there then or with what's there now," he mused. "If game got in our way, we shot it, but everybody was in too much of a hurry to beat the other fellow to the gold fields. There was no time for hunting."

"But with the lakes I've seen on the Canadian side, directly on the trail, I suppose you had plenty of fish once over the Pass," I interjected.

"Yes, I saw some fishing through the ice during the winter of '97-98—but not as much as a fellow might think. I sure could have used some. There were times when I was hungry. Once not much was eaten for three days and I well remember a few white fish that had been caught through a hole at the end of Lake Lindeman. I finally persuaded the owner to sell four fish; one for myself and the others for the three in our party. Those fish brought a dollar a pound. Soon I had my fish on a stick over a good fire, but I didn't get it done—guess I was really hungry. I ate the cooked outside down to raw meat—it made me sick but maybe that was because I had no salt.

"I had offered the fisherman fifty cents for enough salt to sprinkle over all the fish, but was turned down. Then I raised my bid to five dollars for just enough salt to sprinkle over my one trout. Five dollars wouldn't buy the needed pinches of salt! Any wonder I got sick?"

I could not match Ben's version of a Midas story (lots of gold and no food) but I told him about our fishing not far from Lindeman River. In the time it took to burn our fire to glowing wood-coals and boil the coffee, a magnificent lake trout had been caught. Ben, in Seattle, listened as if he were about to taste that filet of trout, rolled in cereal, salted, and thoroughly cooked over our camp fire. Moreover we had salt and did not need five pieces of gold to tempt anyone into selling us his supply. Our salt had been given to us by an Indian family living on Lake Bennett.

"Man, you make living today on the old trail of '98 sound so bright" Ben went on wistfully. "I've wished thousands of times I could go back. Now, Man—you've got me really wanting to try it again." ♦