McClure's Magazine
September, 1897

Life in the Klondike Gold Fields

Personal Observations of the Founder of Dawson

JOE LADUE had run away from San Francisco to escape the people who wished to hear about the Klondike and his luck there; he had fallen in with a carload of Christian Endeavor tourists who were as eager as the Californians to know how gold was picked up; in Chicago he stepped off the train into a circle of questioners; hurrying on to his native Plattsburg in the Adirondacks, he met the same inquiries. Here, however, the curious were his friends; so he talked a day and a night more; then he drove out to the farmhouse that to him is home, and for a short time he felt safe. Saturday morning some of the neighbors came across the fields to see his nuggets and photographs, and to hear his good-luck story. Surely that was the end! Sunday morning he came downstairs in his slippers to have a day of rest. He had just finished breakfast and was standing idly in the farmyard with his friends of the house, when I came down upon him with my request for an account, the longest and most complete he had told yet.

"You must be tired telling about it all," I began.

He smiled faintly. "Yes, I am," he said.

He was the weariest-looking man I ever saw. I have known bankers and business men, editors and soldiers and literary men, who had the same look out of the eyes that this pioneer of the Northwest country has; they were men who had made money or a name, earned by hard labor that which others envied them. They were tired, too. Their true stories were "hard-luck" stories. The disappointments that ran before the final triumph limped in had spoiled the taste for it. None of them showed the truth so plainly as the founder of Dawson, the city of the Klondike. Joe Ladue is a sad-eyed man with a tale of years which no one thinks of, which no one wants to hear about. That is all his own. He is willing to begin where you wish him to, on the day when he "struck it rich." But when his friends and neighbors trooped in as I was leaving him that Sunday, he dropped the bagful of nuggets for them to pass around, finger, and stare at. He went off down to the barn and hid.

He is about forty-five years old. Twenty-five years ago he started away from the woods of Lake Champlain, going to Colorado, Wyoming, Dakota, chasing each rumor of gold, and working—for nothing. His old friend, Mr. Lobdell, "staked him" when he failed, and, at last, some fifteen years ago, he went into Alaska, trading with the Indians, prospecting, milling, building, moving on, working hard all the time. The gold was there. Everybody knew it was somewhere near, that they were walking over it, and some men were finding it. I was in Alaska myself in 1888, and I met miners who were bringing out gold year after year. But Joe Ladue had to stay there till he could dig it out, risking what others met—failure and death. Now he has the gold. What of it? Everybody wished to know how much he got.

“Enough,” he told them, dryly. And he sighed as he saw the listeners’ eyes sparkle with sordid imaginings. He seemed to covet, as they did the gold, their desire for it.

Why was he going back in the spring, then?

“I have to,” he answered. “I’ve got so many interests to look after. There’s the sawmill and the logging and Dawson and a couple of claims staked out that have to be worked. You’ve got to attend to things, you know.” So it was not a mere matter of picking up a fortune and coming back to spend and enjoy it.

The whole interview was in the tone of this answer, simple, plain, colorless, almost lifeless. His description of an outfit, his guide to the route, a remark about the shooting of Miles Canon, the proper way to stake out and work a claim, his view of miners’ meetings—all were given in even mood. Yet it was not indifference or bored patience. He was painstaking in his offerings of facts not asked for, which he thought should be included in an account of the Klondike. His interest was altogether in the men who might be going there, and what he put into the article was framed for actual use. The information which would help no one directly he gave because it was asked for, but briefly, and with a side glance at the trail of the gold-seekers.

Some of the crossings of our purposes were worthwhile. Once, for instance, when he was making his list of the equipment of a Yukon mine on the way in, I pointed out to him that he had forgotten his “gun,” and I meant that he had omitted to mention the revolver which plays such a conspicuous part in the life of most mining camps.

“You don’t need a gun,” he answered. “There’s no game to speak of.”

“But you surely take a revolver.”

“No use; it only adds weight to the pack.”

“What do you have, then — knives ?”

“Yes, you must have knives and forks and spoons, of course.”

When I made my meaning clear, Mr. Ladue gave an interesting glimpse of the order maintained by the miners of the Yukon in their lawless communities, but he was unable to explain it. Most of the men were good fellows, he said. Were there no thieves? Not one. No cutthroats? None. Gamblers?

“Plenty. Everybody gambles, especially in the long winter nights.”

“Don’t they cheat?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“The saloon-keepers won’t have it.”

“How can they prevent it? Are there no professional gamblers in the camps?”

“Yes, but they put up a straight game. And there are men, too, who have been pretty bad before; I have heard that some of them were ex-convicts and fellows who had run away to escape prison and hanging. But none of them try anything on in there.”

“But why don’t they?”

“I don’t know; but they don’t.”

“What are they afraid of? Has any one ever been punished?”

“Not that I remember.”

“Well, why don’t thieves steal on the Klondike?”

“I guess it’s because they dasent.”

Though quietly spoken, this vague answer came with an expression of face — just a quick flash of light and a slight shifting of the body, which suggested the complete explanation.

And there was a hint, too, of the man who was resting under the calm surface I was prospecting; so I kept digging.

The first sentence of Mr. Ladue’s story, as he gave it, was a warning to the men who were rushing into the Northwest. He foresaw starvation ahead not only for them, but for those who were already on the ground. Some would have provided themselves with a supply of food sufficient to last them, but others would not. All would suffer in consequence.

“Not the men who have taken enough,” I protested.

“Yes, they all will. Won’t the food have to be divided up even all around?”

This is Joe Ladue.

Ladue’s Story

“I am willing to tell all I can think of about the Klondike and the great Northwest country so long as it is understood that I am not advising anybody to go there. That I will not do. It goes pretty hard with some of the men who go in. Lots of them never come out, and not half of those who do make a stake. The country is rich, richer than anyone has ever said, and the finds you have heard about are only the beginnings, just the surface pickings, for the country has not been prospected except in spots. But there are a great many hardships to go through, and to succeed, a man has to have most of the virtues that are needed in other places not so far away and some others besides. This winter I expect to hear that there is starvation on the Klondike on account of the numbers that have rushed in without sufficient supplies, for I know that the stores there have not enough to go around, while the men who laid in provisions have only enough for themselves. They will divide up, as they always do, but that will simply spread the trouble and make things worse. Next spring, from the fifteenth of March on, is the time to go.

“What you call the Klondike we speak of as the Throndike. I don’t know exactly why. The Klondike Creek, which names the district where the richest streaks have been struck, was the Throchec to the Indians, which means salmon, not reindeer, as I have read since I came out in the spring. There is sense in that name, because the stream, which is about the size of the Saranac River up here in the Adirondacks, is chock-full of salmon, and you never see a reindeer there, not even a moose. In fact, game is very scarce on the Klondike, as it is all along the Yukon.

“No guns or pistols or anything of that kind are needed. Here is what ought to be put in an outfit: A camp-stove, frying-pan, kettle, coffee-pot, knives and forks and spoons, and a drill or canvas tent; an ax, a hatchet, a whipsaw, a handsaw, a two-inch auger, a pick and shovel, and ten pounds of nails. For wear, heavy woolen clothes are best — not furs — and the stoutest overshoes you can get, with arctic socks. Then, there is a “sleigh,” as we call it, really a sled, six or eight feet long and sixteen inches in the run. It is safest to buy this in Juneau, for those you pick up in other places won’t track. I don’t take a canoe unless I am late going in, but they make the lightest and strongest in Victoria, at about 160 to 200 pounds weight. The simplest thing to go down the river on is a raft, but to make that or a boat, you need, besides the nails and tools I named, two pounds of oakum and five pounds of pitch. A year’s supply of grub, which can be bought as cheaply in Juneau as anywhere, I think, is: 10 sacks of flour, 150 pounds of sugar, 100 pounds of bacon, thirty pounds of coffee; ten pounds of tea, 100 pounds of beans, fifty pounds of oatmeal, 100 pounds of mixed fruits, twenty-five pounds of salt, about ten dollars’ worth of spices and knickknacks, and some quinine to break up colds. The total cost of this outfit is about $200, but no man should start with less than $500, and twice that is ten times as good.

“The easiest way to get there is by boat, which will take you around by St. Michael’s at the mouth of the Yukon, and transferring you there to the side-wheeler, carry you seventeen hundred miles up the river to Dawson. But that isn’t independent.

“If a man wants to go in with his own provisions, free of connections with the transportation companies, which will sell but will not let anybody take along his own supplies, then the Chilkoot Pass route is the best. And that isn’t so bad. You start from Juneau and go by steamer to Chilkat, then to Dyea, eight miles, where you hire Indians to help you to the summit of this pass. From Dyea you walk ten miles through snow to Sheep Camp, which is the last timber. From there it is a climb of six miles to the summit, 4,100 feet high, and very often you or the Indians have to make two or three trips up and down to bring up the outfit. Leaving the Indians there, you go down, coasting part way, fourteen miles to Lake Linderman. That is five miles long, with a bad piece of rapids at the lower end. But if it is early in the season, you sled it on the lake and take the mile of rapids in a portage to Lake Bennett, which is a twenty-eight-mile tramp. It is four miles’ walk to Caribou Crossing, then a short ride or tramp to Takoon Lake, where, if the ice is breaking, you can go by boat or raft, or if it is still hard, you must sled it twenty-one miles, to the Tagish River and Lake, four miles long. Take the left bank of the river again, and you walk four miles to Marsh Lake, where you may have to build a raft or boat to cover its twenty-four miles of length. If not, then you must at the bottom, for there begins the Lynx River, which is usually the head of navigation, for unless the season is very late or the start very early, the rest of the way is almost all by water.

“Thirty miles down the Lynx River you come suddenly upon Miles Caflon, which is considered the worst place on the trip. I don’t think it is dangerous, but no man ought to shoot the rapids there without taking a look at them from the shore. The miners have put up a sign on a rock to the left just before you get to it, so you have warning and can go ashore walk along the edge on the ice. It is sixty feet wide and seven-eighths of a mile long, and the water humps up in the middle, it goes so fast. But very few have been caught there, though they were killed, of course. Below the canyon there are three miles of bad river to White Horse Rapids, which are rocky and swift, with falls, but taking chances is unnecessary, and I consider it pretty good dropping. After the rapids it is thirty miles down to Lake Labarge, the last of the lakes, which is thirty-one miles to row, sail, or tramp, according to the condition of the water. From there a short portage brings you to the head of the Lewis River, really the Yukon, though we do not call it that till, after drifting, poling, or rowing two hundred miles, the Pelly River flows in and makes one big, wide stream. I must warn men who are going in to watch out for Five Fingers Rapids, about 141 miles down the Lewis, where they must take the right-hand channel. That practically ends the journey, for, though it is 180 miles from the junction of the Pelly and Lewis, it is simply a matter of drifting. And I want to say for the hardness of this whole trip, that I have brought horses in that way, using a raft. And it is curious to see how soon they learn to stand still while you are going, and to walk on and off the raft mornings and evenings at camping-places.

“When I left Dawson in the spring there were some two thousand white men, forty families, and two hundred Indians in the Klondike district, most of them living in cabins or tents on claims. The town, which I named after the man who fixed the boundary between American and Canadian possessions, is new, having only a few houses in it, and is chiefly a source of supplies and a place of meeting. The Alaska Commercial Company has the store there, and the Canadian government has a reservation with a squad of sixty mounted police and a civil officer or two. The site is on the east bank of the Yukon and on the north bank of the Klondike River, which comes into the Yukon at that point. The boundary line is seventy miles southwest.

“The gold has been found in the small creeks that flow into the Klondike. First comes Bonanza Creek, a mile and a half back of Dawson. It is thirty miles long and very rich, but its tributaries are still better. Ten miles up it the Eldorado, for example, is the most productive stream that has been turned up; it is only six miles long, and is all staked out in claims, but $250 has been taken out in a pan there, and I estimate that the yield will be $20,000,000, Seven miles above Bonanza the Klondike receives the waters of Bear Creek, which is also good, but its six miles of length is claimed by this time. Hunker Creek is fifteen miles up the Klondike, and up that is a little stream, about the size of a brook, which is called Gold Bottom. All these streams flow from the south, and they come from hills that must have lots of gold in them, for other creeks that run out of them into Indian River show yellow, too. Indian River is about thirty miles south or up the Yukon from Dawson. Stewart River and Sixty Mile Creek with their tributaries, all south, and Forty Mile Creek with its branches, off to the northwest — all have gold, and though they have been prospected some, they have not been claimed like the Klondike. Claims have to be staked out, of course, according to the Canadian laws, which I think are clear and fair. The only fault I find with them is that they recognize no agreements that are not in writing, and they do not give a man who “stakes” a prospector any share in a claim. But I suppose these difficulties can be got around all right by being more careful about having things in writing hereafter.

“Another point that is hard to get over is that you have to swear that no man before you took gold off that claim, which you can’t do, not knowing whether there was anybody ahead of you or not. The rest of the requirements are sensible. All you have to do is to find gold, to which you must swear, then you mark off about five hundred feet along the bed of the creek where no one has laid a claim, and stick up four stakes with your name on them, one at each corner of your land. Across the ends you blaze the trees. This done, you go to the register of claims, pay fifteen dollars, and, after a while, the surveyor will come along and make it exact. Claims run about ten to the mile, and are limited practically only by the width of the ground between the two “benches,” or sides of the hills, that close in the stream. The middle line of a series of claims follows the “pay streak,” which is usually the old bed of the creek, and it runs across the present course of the water several times, sometimes, in a short distance.

Working a Claim

“Working a claim can go on at all seasons of the year, and part of the process is best in winter, but prospecting is good only in summer, when the water is flowing and the ground loose. That is another reason why it is useless for new hands to go in now. They cannot do anything except work for others till spring. Then they can prospect with water flowing and the ground soft. If they strike it they can stake out their claim, clear a patch of trees, underbrush, and stones, and work the surface tilt winter sets in. We quit the “pan” or “hand” method then. The “rocker” is almost never used except in “sniping,” which is a light surface search on unclaimed land or on a claim that is not being worked for enough to pay expenses or to raise a “grub-stake.” As soon as the water freezes so that it won’t flow in on a man, we begin to dig to the bedrock, sometimes forty feet down. The ground is frozen, too, in winter, of course, but by “burning” it, as we say, we can soften it enough to let pick and shovel in. All the dirt is piled on one side, and when spring opens again, releasing the water, we put up our sluices and wash it all summer or till we have enough. There has not been any quartz mining yet on the Yukon, but back of the placers, in the hills which have not been prospected, the original ledges must be holding good things for the capitalist.

Local Government on the Klondike

“Life on the Klondike is pretty quiet. Most of the men there are hard workers; but the climate, with the long winter nights, forces us to be idle a great deal, and miners are miners, of course. And there is very little government. The point is, however, that such government as there is, is good. I like the Canadian officers, the Canadian laws, and the Canucks themselves. The police are strict and efficient. The captain was a fine man, but he had more than he could do this last season, when the rush for the Klondike came. That began in August a year ago, and as the rumor spread up and down the Yukon, the towns and mining camps were deserted by everybody who could get away. Men left the women to come on after them, and hurried off to the Klondike to lay out claims. Circle City was cleaned out. There wasn’t room enough on the steamer to take all who wanted to get away to the new diggings, and many a good-paying claim was abandoned for the still better ones on the creeks that make the Klondike. The captain of the police had only a few men without horses to detail around over the claims, and, besides his regular duties, he had to act as register of claims and settle disputes that were brought to him. And there were a good many of these. The need of civil officers is very great, especially of a surveyor.

“The miners on the Yukon are shrewd, experienced men, and sometimes they are tricky. I do not like the kind of government they set up for themselves, except in the very first stages. It is all by miners’ meetings. They begin by being fair, but after a while cliques are formed, which run things to suit the men who are in them, or, which is just as bad, they turn the sessions into fun. Nobody can get justice from a miners’ meeting when women are on one side.

“When Bonanza Creek was opened up some of the claims got mixed up in the rush, and the measurements were all wrong. Notices were posted on the store doors and on the houses, calling a miners’ meeting to settle the boundaries of claims. As was usual in such meetings, a committee was selected to mark off the claims all the way up the creek with a fifty-foot rope. Somehow a rope only forty feet long sneaked in, and that made all the claims short. The space that was left over was grabbed by the fellows who were in the game.

“Sometimes in winter, when there is plenty of time, a dispute that is left to the miners’ meeting grows into a regular trial with lawyers (there are several among the miners) engaged for a fee, a committee in place of the judge, and a regular jury. Witnesses are examined, the lawyers make speeches, and the trial lasts till nobody who listens to it all knows what to think. I never liked it. The best way, according to my experience, for two men who can’t agree to have a settlement is to choose their own committee, each side picking a representative and both selecting a third. Then the committee is fair, and generally the decision is satisfactory.

“Most of the time when the men cannot work is spent in gambling. The saloons are kept up in style, with mirrors, decorations, and fine, polished, hardwood bars. No cheating is allowed, and none is tried. The saloon-keepers won’t have it in their places. Nobody goes armed, for it is no use. Some of the men are the kind that would take naturally to shooting, but they don’t try it on the Yukon. The only case that I know of was when James Cronister shot Washburn, and that didn’t amount to anything, because Washburn was a bad man. There was a jury trial, but the verdict was that Cronister was justified.

“The only society or organization for any purpose besides business in there is the Yukon Pioneers. I don’t belong to that, so I don’t know much about it. It is something like the California

Pioneers of ’49. They have a gold badge in the shape of a triangle with Y. P. on it and the date ’89. To be a member you must have come into the country before 1889. But the time limit used to be earlier, and it may be later now, for they have shoved it on up several times since I have noticed. The society does some good. When a man gets sick and caves in it raises money to send him out. Now and then it gives a ball, and there are plans on foot to have more pleasure of that sort next winter and after that. But we need a hotel or some other big building before much of that can be done.

“In fact, we need a great many things besides gold. We have no coin. Gold dust and nuggets pass current by weight at about fifteen dollars and fifty cents to the ounce. It is pretty rough reckoning, as, for instance, when a man brings in a nugget mixed with quartz. Then we take it altogether, gravel and gold, for pure gold, and make it up on the goods. Carpenters, blacksmiths—all the trades—are wanted, and men who can work at them can make much more than the average miner. They can’t make what a lucky miner can, but if they are enterprising they can make a good stake. Wages are fifteen dollars a day, and a man who works for himself can earn much more than that. I have gone into the logging business with a mill in Dawson. The spruce trees are thirty inches through and, after rafting them down from Ogilvie and Forth Mile, you get $130 a thousand foot for them sawed into boards. Then there is butchering for the man who will drive sheep over in the summer. It has been done, and is to be done again. But it is useless for me to go on telling all the occupations that would pay high profits. The future of the Northwest country is not so long as that of a country that can look forward to other industries than mining and the business that depends on mining, but it is longer than the lifetime of any of us. The surface has been pricked in a few places, but I do not know that the best has been found, and I am quite sure no one has any idea of the tremendous extent of the placer diggings, to say nothing of the quartz that is sure to follow. Then, all the other metals, silver and copper and iron, have been turned up, while coal is plentiful. I believe thoroughly in the country. All I have doubt about is the character of some of the men who are rushing in to get rich by just picking up the gold.”