

Call Number: 02-00-32 Pt. A

Pierre Berton Speech

Summary Created by: Jacob Metoxen

Date created: 3/7/2013, 3/11/2013

Notes: Original on 7 inch reel, copy on CD

Charles Keims is talking. Mr. Keims is from the College of Arts and Letters at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks. Mr. Keims is telling the crowd about how he was telling Pierre Berton about an old chum of Mr. Keims' named Gilbert Thompson. Gilbert Thompson has told Mr. Keims that he was conceived in Eagle and born in Dawson because that was the custom at the time [Charles Keims gets a polite laugh from the crowd]. Keims is discussing the drive to the University and how he was telling Pierre Berton about Gilbert Thompson being all over Alaska and collected all sorts of things for the museum. Ludwig Bruwinsky [?] is mentioned. Berton and Thompson were reliving their old days around Alaska. Gilbert Thompson is asked to stand and gets a round of applause from the crowd.

On May 30th, 1962 Keims says he received a book titled "Klondike: the Life and Death of the Last Great Gold Rush" by Berton. Keims says that Alaskans conceive that Berton's book is the greatest book about the gold rush ever written. Berton has written 15 books, written plays, written news columns, and has been on the TV and radio. He is on Canadian Independent Television Station on his own half hour conversation program. He is also on the panel of "Front Page Challenge." He is also editorial director of the illustrated book division of McClelland & Stewart. Berton is in the process of writing a two volume book of Canadian science. He was the news editor at the News Herald in Vancouver at age 21. At age 31 he was the managing editor of Canada's largest magazine, Maclean's. Many of Berton's accomplishments are discussed including his film "City of Gold." Pierre Berton's book "The Comfortable Pew" broke all existing Canadian book sale records. Keims says when he asked Berton for some words of wisdom to pass along to his writing classes; Thompson said he had no particular regimen, he just writes. Thompson said very few things are written by just talking. Keims says Mr. Berton is a doer.

At 7:00 minutes of the recording Mr. Berton begins speaking. Berton says he knows a lot about the panhandle of Alaska because he used to travel up and down the Alaskan coast. This is his second time in Fairbanks. He says the last time he was in Alaska was 1962. Berton tells a story about going to Fairbanks with his family at 8:00 minutes into the recording. The first time Berton was in Alaska he was 7 years old. It was an excursion on the old Steame Yukon from Dawson City to Forty Mile.

When "Klondike: the Life and Death of the Last Great Gold Rush" was published, a group from the United States purchased the rights to make the book "Klondike" into a television series. The group paid Berton a good amount of money as an advisor but they never asked his advice. He went to New York to see how things were coming along. The producers were going into production next spring. Berton asked the producers about the central character in the series and the producers said they had a US

Marshall as the main character. The producers said the US Marshall-type is in Dawson city and there is lawlessness. Berton told them that there wasn't a single murder in Dawson in 1898 or a theft. The producer's face fell and he said they were going to have to move the location...to the American side. The whole story was set in Skagway. The show was called "Klondike" but they really should have called it "Skagway." Berton said that in spring he was in Los Angeles covering the Democratic National Convention, the one where John F. Kennedy was nominated. Berton tells the story of when he went to the studio of "Klondike" and that there was a crowd of people. Berton sat down with the producers and writers and discussed what it was like in Klondike. Berton told the producers there were no cigarettes but the producers said they have a cigarette sponsor so they will be smoking cigarettes in the show. He told the producers that there are people from all over the world who climbed Chilkoot Pass. Kanakas from Hawaii, Maoris from New Zealand who made huts of wattle. Berton suggested to the producers that the producers diversify the TV show. The producers said they weren't going to let black people on the show. The show lasted 20 episodes and they changed the title and locale to "Acapulco." Berton was in the Office of Screen Gems [an employer] 3 or 4 months later and he told the president about having a snow show and the president said the public wants "tits and sand!"

Berton begins discussing the first discovery of gold on Bonanza Creek, a creek where Berton played in his childhood. He mentions George Washington Carmack who had come up and become a "squaw man" and thought of himself as an Indian. Carmack was a fisherman. Carmack was an uncommonly sensitive man who wrote poetry and had an organ in his cabin. Miners didn't think much of Carmack because he didn't care about gold. He was fishing when Robert Henderson came along. Robert Henderson was from Nova Scotia who had spent his entire life since 13 searching for gold in Colorado, New Zealand, British Columbia gold camps, into Alaska and the Yukon. Henderson suggested to Carmack that he look for gold but Carmack didn't want to look for gold. After Carmack and Skookum [skookum means "strong" in Chinook] Jim fished for salmon, they went to see what Henderson was doing and they wanted to borrow some tobacco. Henderson made the worst mistake of his life by saying he would lend Carmack some tobacco but he wouldn't give those damn "siawashes" [?] any. Carmack was leaving Henderson's place and Henderson tells Carmack to go to Rabbit Creek to see if there was any gold. They went over to Rabbit Creek and while Carmack is snoozing Skookum Jim found a piece of flakey bedrock. If Henderson hadn't made that remark about the "siawashes", Carmack and Skookum Jim would have went back and told him, but they didn't. The discovery resulted in a bitter disappointment that dogged Henderson the rest of his life. Carmack and the Natives went and staked the discovery claim on Bonanza Creek and started the Klondike gold rush. Henderson looked up and saw people going over the ridge and asked "What's going on?" and people said "Carmack has struck it rich in Bonanza Creek." According to Berton, Carmack for all his life wanted to be an Indian and then when he got the gold he ditched his wife, married a camp follower, and lived happily ever after. After doing everything wrong. Dawson Charlie who wanted to be treated like a white man, was treated like white man, they allowed him to drink. One day when Charlie was drunk he fell off a bridge and was drowned. Skookum Jim wanted to be a prospector. He was getting 90,000 a year in royalties and killed himself trying to find another claim. Bob Henderson spent the rest of his life looking for a gold mine.

Berton says you could pan Dawson and find gold everywhere. Harry Gleaves panned the floor of the old Orpheum Theatre and found \$1,500 dollars in three hours. Berton says six steamboats stood rotting at the old shipyard. The town was supposed to be large enough for 30,000 and only 1,500 lived there. Berton's father built a boat in an old hotel of Front Street. Berton went in and found a stack of letters written by a dancehall girl to her boyfriend in the creeks. When Berton and his father worked at the camps in Dominion Creek, the paraphernalia of the gold rush was all around them. There were cabins, picks, and wheel barrels. Pierre was walking up Dominion Creek and he saw an enormous machine. The machine was set on two tracks and it was a mechanical digger. The machine moved exactly 10 feet. The whole valley was scraped clean according to Pierre Berton. The people were interesting. Oxford Dawns [?] is mentioned. The people from Dawson were all great readers. Berton starts discussing that the worst thing that can happen to anyone is to have sudden riches thrust upon you. If the Klondike Gold Rush tells us anything it tells us that sudden riches are not good for people. Almost everybody who made it big in Dawson died penniless. Charlie Anderson, the lucky Swede, bought a claim when he was drunk and tried to give it back. He eventually got a million dollars out of it. The attitude towards money, wealth, or gold was peculiar because there was so much of it around. Pat Galvin summarized it. Galvin had just brought the Steamer Yukoner from Willie Erving. It wasn't in good condition because Erving, from Fraser, Canada, didn't dock his steamer in the normal way. Pat's nephew talked about expense to him. Galvin turned on his nephew and said "Expense?! Expense?! I am disgusted with you. Don't show your ignorance by using that cheap Outside word. We do not use it here. Never repeat it in my presence again. You must learn the way of Alaska. That word is not understood in the North. If you have money, spend it. That's what money is for. That's the way we do business." Galvin was offered a million dollars for his stake in Bonanza Creek. Galvin died broke but he never whimpered.

33:25. The way the gold miners bought status in Klondike was by the grand gesture. The master of the grand gesture was Swiftwater Bill Gates. He was 5'4. No one paid any attention to Gates at all until he struck it rich. He had a Prince Albert coat. Swiftwater Gates had the only starched collar in town. The great status symbol in Dawson was an egg because eggs were two dollars each. Salt was sold for its weight in gold. Swiftwater was attempting to woo a girl named Grace "Gussie" Lamour who he wanted to marry. Gussie wasn't having it. She was eating at one of the cafes and she was very fond of eggs. Swiftwater went and brought every egg in town, had them fried, and fed them to the dogs in front of Lamore. She promised to marry him, conveniently forgetting she had a husband and four year old child in San Francisco. He didn't drink but he bathed in champagne in a hotel room. The bill for damages from the hotel was \$15,000 dollars. Gates used to hire bell boys to page him and say things like "Swiftwater Gates, the King of the Klondike, is wanted."

Arizona Charlie built the Palace Grand, the building was restored in Dawson in 1899. Arizona Charlie [Charles Henson Meadows] invited 40 of the townspeople to attend a banquet and he put \$100 bills under every plate. Big Alec Macdonald's attitude towards gold was that it was trash. At one point he was worth \$39 million dollars. They called him the "Big Moose of Nova Scotia." He became a social lion. There was a pair of tourists in 1898. The tourists were two Buxton matron society women. The women brought dogs, canaries, and pigeons with them. One was a widow of an admiral; the other was a niece of a former president, President Martin Van Buren. The women invited Big Alec Macdonald to dinner.

Macdonald had status for the first time in his life. He always did the public presentations for the town but Berton says Macdonald didn't know how to speak. Sam Steele was the superintendent of the police. When Steele left in 1899 the townspeople decided they were going to have a ceremony. Big Alec would present gold to Sam during the ceremony. Speech writers worked with Big Alec. Everyone gathered around the Royal Canadian Mount Police Barracks and the steamboat came down to the front of the barracks. Big Alec simply told Sam "Here's a poke of gold, goodbye."

When the governor general's wife, Lady Minto [Mary Caroline Grey], came in 1901 they still had Alec as the public speaker. He presented Lady Minto with gold and said, "Here you go, its trash." Alec had a big bowl of nuggets and when people came over he'd tell them to take some nuggets, take big ones. Big Alec died chopping wood of a heart attack. Berton says that the gold rush situation was unique because there were people from all over the world, who suddenly got really rich, and didn't have anything to buy with the money. So they really threw it away. Not for the sake of throwing it away, but for the gesture of throwing it away. People in Dublin call this "conspicuous waste." A lot of people used to build dancehalls and buy champagne in the dance halls. The status symbol was the "private box." You could only order champagne in the private box and it was \$30 dollars a pint. One guy managed to spend \$1,700 on champagne in one night at the Monte Carlo. He had a couple girls with him. Roddy McDowell paid a dollar to have a dance which lasted 30 seconds. Roddy spent \$50,000 on dances from girls. He would exhaust the dancehall girls so they had to entertain him in teams. There were two sisters name Jacqueline and Rosalyn, better known as "Vaseline" and "Glycerin." They would dance with Roddy at a dollar a dance.

The transportation status for people in Yukon and Alaska was the dog team. Coatless Curly was very lavish with his puppies. He was called Coatless because he never wore a coat. "Nigger" Jim was a white southerner called "Nigger" Jim because of his accent had eight dogs worth \$2,500 dollars. Gamblers threw money on the gaming tables because money was cheap. Harry Woolrich made \$60,000 dollars in a single game. Subsequently he decided he was going to keep the money and never gamble again. He went down to the boat and all his friends were gathering around him. The boat was delayed half an hour so he went up and started gambling again. 24 hours later he was still there and he lost it all. There was a night watchman for the Whitepass Company called One Eye Reilly. His lunch hour was at midnight, which was a good time for gambling. He would play faro bank for an hour. One day he started to win at every turn of the card. He kept playing and quit his job. He played all night and kept winning. He went from gambling house to gambling house and kept winning until about 7 or 8 that morning at Monte Carlo they brought in a very experienced dealer to deal against him and the streak ended. He won \$28,000. He hired a dog driver to take him to Skagway. In Skagway he met a guy with some dice and lost all the money in three passes.

One of the things that Berton says amazes him is that there were some people who didn't care about getting rich. One example is the Canadian government surveyor, William Ogilvie. His job was to resurvey the claims between Bonanza and El Dorado. He had a mule skinner from Idaho named Dick Low with him. Dick Low was working as a chain man and hadn't found any land to stake so Ogilvie told him to stake some land. Low staked a little sliver of ground and tried selling it the next day for \$900 and didn't get any takers. He sunk a shaft in it and didn't find anything. Dick Low sunk another shaft and got

\$48,000 dollars' worth of gold in 8 hours. Dick Low's land paid out half a million dollars and was considered one of the richest piece of ground. Dick Low got drunk and stayed drunk until all the money was gone. He ended up in Fairbanks in 1905 peddling water by the bucket. He died broke in 1907. William Ogilvie, who was an honest man, and lived to a ripe old age and had many grandchildren. He died happy. His granddaughter lives in Ottawa and was up for the Gold Rush Festival and 1962.

In 1897 before the outside world knew about the gold rush, the inside Alaskans knew about it and that's when the fortunes were made. There were two men who didn't care about the rush. One was a murderer [Frank Novak], the other was a private detective [C.C. Parrin] hired to capture him. The murderer was a kid name Novak. Novak killed a farmer and burnt the farm building. Novak thought the insurance company would think he was the farmer and he'd get the insurance money. Parrin was the private detective who was hired and traveled 25,000 miles looking for Novak. Novak didn't know about the stampede. He was going to Klondike because he wanted to get away. Parrin had to go to Ottawa and get a deportation order. At one point they were both building boats about a mile apart from one another. They reached Dawson and there were fortunes to be made. Parrin found Novak, got him out of there and paid no attention to the greatest gold rush in history.

52:00

Dawson was not a violent town according to Berton. Berton said his father told him he could leave his pack on the trail and come back in two weeks and it would be untouched. A New Zealander named Jim Dalziel [?] used to go away from his house and leave his suit hanging on the side of the wall with an 18 karat gold watch hanging out of the pocket and he'd come back and it would still be there. There were no keys in Dawson up until the 1930's. This was all because of the mounted police. No one could carry a gun in Dawson city despite all of the movies portraying people carrying guns. The police confiscated so many revolvers they auctioned them off as "metal piece souvenirs." There were heinous crimes. Chopping your wood on Sunday was one. One man was ticketed \$3 for examining his fishnets on the Sabbath. People used to have excursions to Alaska where people would get on boats and once they hit the border they'd open up the alcohol. One Sunday the Bonanza King hit the shore with 368 and the Tirol with 100. The Bonanza King ran out of fuel and the Tirol had engine trouble and both the boats were loaded with drunken people. The boats floated across the Arctic Circle. Bert Parker said Dawson was a morgue all that week. When the boats came back the whole town was down on the docks to greet the people on a Thursday.

Berton begins discussing the differences between the Canadian experience and the American experience. Berton says the American experience is a revolutionary experience. The Canadian experience is a colonial experience. The American experience is where everything springs out of the grass roots. This is especially true in the Yukon and Alaska. On the Alaska side there was a good deal of grass roots democracy in which people made their own laws. The miner's laws were the law. The miners could hang or lash a man. There were always committees being born on the Alaska side according to the diaries found. On the Canadian side, the mining law was always the same throughout the camps. It wasn't enforced by a committee or grass roots democracy. It was enforced by a court of justice, a British court. The judge was appointed, not elected. In the Yukon there was the Northwest

Mounted Police. On one side there was freedom, which in its worst aspects you had anarchy. The other side there was order, which to an extreme was a dictatorship. Berton gives the example of the difference that you saw on both sides of the border, the White Pass. On one side you had Samuel B. Steele who was according to Berton was like a dictator. In Skagway, Alaska Samuel Steele described it as a hell on earth. Steele was passing through and he tried getting some sleep and he couldn't because of all the bullets being shot. The town was run by Soapy Smith [Jefferson Randolph Smith]. In Skagway one man took over, Jefferson Randolph Smith was a very cool customer and took over. He ran everything. He bought the newspaper. He then bought the judge, politicians, and Marshall. He made promises of getting answers for telegraphs within three hours. Berton says there were no telegraph wires, just a tent. Smith had dummy sleds for conmen to pull up the pass. They were wire frames filled with feathers. They had people disguised as newcomers helping to carry the bags of men arriving off the boat and taking their bags up to mountains and stealing the supplies. Berton says the American does not like order from above. An American did not like the mounted police telling them what to do. The Americans eventually stopped liking Soapy Smith so they took the traditional frontier way of doing things; they formed a committee and shot Soapy Smith. Smith tried breaking up the committee meeting and Frank Reid shot him.

At 102:30 the recording stops