

Call Number: 02-00-32 Pt. B

Pierre Berton Speech

Summary Created by: Jacob Metoxen

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Notes: Original on 7 inch reel, copy on CD

Berton is talking about a book he was writing. He begins discussing Nome and how 8,000 people left Nome and the town had a long decline. He says the stampede has all the ingredients for a great story because of all the twists and turns. There are also a lot of bizarre things that happened. In the spring of 1899 you had Father Judge, the Saint of Dawson. Judge gained the respect of everybody because he owned nothing. He only cared for others. He worked so hard that he killed himself really. He gave up his bed for people who had typhoid. They tried to give him a suit of clothes and the whole town showed up, he wouldn't wear it. There was also a weird story of the "Nigger" Jim Stampede, where Jim Dougherty decided to test the town. He invented the story of gold in a remote valley down the Yukon River. He told three people because he wanted to see what would happen. He started this crazy stampede in which 1500 people rushed off in the dead of winter, 60 below 0. As a result a gold rush was recreated. People climbed a miniature Chilkoot with their packs and hammered in their stakes. They found nothing because nothing was ever there. When they got back Father Judge died. Everyone wore black and it got cold. They paid \$1,000 dollars for a mahogany coffin. Suddenly a dance hall caught fire and it was like hell. The irony is that the town council has been too cheap to pay the firemen. They had to chop a hole in the ice and use that water but when the water is going through the hoses it freezes the nozzle. 117 buildings were demolished including all of Dance Hall Row and Paradise Alley where the prostitutes were. The strangest event that night was when Bill [William] Mcphee rushed into the Pioneer's Saloon. Bill Mcphee was from Forty Mile. Belinda Maroney said "That's it Bill, get the money because the pokes of gold were stacked behind the bar." Bill said to hell with the money, he wanted the moose head. All the gold was fused into one epic mass from the fire. Walter Washburn saw his famous opera house go up in flames. He stood with the others and all he said was "Well that's the way I made it, and that's the way it's gone. So what the hell." Berton says thank you and steps from the podium. There is a lengthy applause.

At 109:13 Mr. Keims says that Mr. Berton will answer questions from the crowd.

A man from the crowd asks why there isn't as much information about Nome as there is about Klondike. Berton says that Nome was the sequel to the Klondike Gold Rush. A lot of people went on to Nome. Wyatt Earp was at Nome. He ran a saloon there. Tex Rickard started in Dawson City and went to Nome and he made a lot of money. Berton says there isn't really a book about Nome but someone should write it.

A man asks Berton if he ever considered doing a film about the gold rush. Berton says there was a greenhouse in Dawson made of film plates. They tore down the greenhouse and made a film out of the negatives of the plates. Berton says he hasn't thought about doing a film using that technique.

A man asks Berton what his advice would be for Alaskans who are talking about writing about Alaska in its early days, both fictional and factual? Berton says he's not an expert on fiction so he'll stick to facts. Berton says it's important to find out what went on and not what you think went on. Berton says not to try and twist the story. Don't embellish it; don't try to add anything of your own. If you're writing history you have to exert some discipline. Berton says most true stories are more interesting than fiction. Berton said he interviewed about 50 old timers and he didn't believe any of the stories until he checked the documents.

At 113:50 a woman asks about the amount of supplies people packed and she is asking Berton how people ate their food. Berton says what they mainly ate was beans, which was high protein. They cooked the beans and froze them. Beans and tea were the basis. Berton says if you only eat meat it's not good enough, you have to have vegetables with it.

A man says all the pictures he's seen were probably taken in the spring and summer but people are always dressed up and he wonders how they stayed warm? Berton says they used fur coats and parkas. The ones from outside came in wearing mackinaw coats and heavy gauntlets. Outfitters in Seattle were making a killing selling coats.

A man asks about Berton's TV show and how he managed to get along with a "Gordon decision" [?]. Berton says you have to be a Canadian to understand that question. Berton says he doesn't always agree with Gordon but he's one of the most refreshing guys in Canada because he says what he thinks and he says it bluntly.

A man asks Berton how he views Alaska today. Berton says he doesn't want to give a country he doesn't live in advice, and instead will say what he thinks about Canada. Berton says he walks in Klondike with a sense of tragedy. He says all the natural beauty of Klondike has been destroyed forever by the miners. Berton says he doesn't want to see the North destroyed and ravaged the way the miners did to the Northwest Valley. He says the last hope is for this Northwest country, whether Canadian or Alaskan. He doesn't think profit should enter into the consideration of the future. He says he seconds the governors thoughts about controlling pollution in the Arctic. He says we have the tundra, the Barren Ground, as Samuel Hearn called it. When [Francis] Leopold McClintock was searching for the lost Franklin Expedition on one of the arctic islands he came across what he thought were fresh cart tracks but he knew those tracks had been left by Sir Edward Perry 30 years before. Berton said we have to move very gingerly in the north simply for sudden gain and we must think of the long term gain. Berton then receives an applause and asks if there are any more questions. Keims starts to ask the crowd if they have any ideas of who to bring to talk next year and the recording stops.