

Harry Badger oral interview in UAF Rasmuson Library Archives

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Tape H75-12; no recording date listed

Transcribed 8/19/2010 by Ron Inouye

A = unidentified announcer: HB = Harry Badger

A: Every Wednesday evening at 7:30 brings you the program, "Here's a Pioneer". It's a weekly presentation of the Pioneer Cab Company with a stand across from the Nordale Hotel, always available and at your service 24 hours of the day at the telephone East 1-0-A. That's Pioneer Cab bringing you "Here's a Pioneer".

And tonight's choice for an old timer is the man who answers to the name of the "Strawberry King" of the Tanana Valley. And, of course many of you will recognize him as Harry Badger. Now Harry is a man who came to this country at the turn of the century...what was the exact year there, Harry?

HB: That I came north?

A: That's right.

HB: 1900.

A: Now, to sort of introduce yourself, will you tell us something about your old home down in the states, and the circumstances surrounding your decision to come north?

HB: I was born and raised on a farm about 30 miles from St. Paul, in Minnesota. I stayed there until I was 19 years old and then came west where my father and brothers had gone when I was very small, I was a baby, in fact. I went out and I stayed in California for a year and a half, and I didn't like it down there. I came north to the state of Washington. And bought a piece of cut over land, about 4 miles from Mt. Vernon in a town called Burlington. It wasn't a town, there wasn't anything there but a hall the loggers had used. I tried to hue out piece of ground there that you could plant a little something on and raise some fruit trees. We were confronted with some 10' trees, stumps to dig out. When we got one of them out, we had quite a garden patch cleared.

I lived there for 10 years right along side the man who was my partner up here now Walter Creek. In '97 the Stampede from Dawson started, and in '98 the first ones that went from out town came back, men who had never had over 3 ½ (?) in their lives come back with 2 to 5 thousand dollars, and some of them more..

I was at the depot when the train come in with them. And I went up home, this was in the very latter part of 1909 — '99 I should say. Walter and I were living together then in my place. I told him what I had seen, and he said "Let's go".

I said, "Alright, go sell your horse, and I'll see if I can borrow enough money on this place to get our outfit"—which I did. We started, we went down to Seattle right after

the holidays in '99, got our outfit, got onto an old cattle boat, the old "Humboldt". I heard Lutro telling about pitching around and some water coming in the windows.

Didn't come in the windows on us, but when they got out into Queen Charlotte Sound, we had a load of cattle underneath in the hold. The sea broke over the edge and started going down, and the hatches weren't battened down so the old Swede that was running it turned the boat around to go back in the shelter of the island so that we could get the hatches battened down. One of the fellows that was with me in the stateroom commenced to cry, and he said "Boys get up and get dressed, we're going to drown." And I said "Shut up; what's the use of getting dressed if we're going to drown; we can do it just as well this way." (laughter)

A: What course did you choose in coming into this county? Where did you land finally on the "Humboldt?"

HB: At Skagway.

A: At Skagway. Then what kind of a trip did you have over the pass?

HB: Just hard work.

A: Hard work, pulling a sled?

HB: Pulling a sled by the neck, and we were 40 days coming in.

A; Snow an cold?

HB: Snow and cold. We landed at Tagish, went to the police station there at Tagish in the afternoon. We had handkerchiefs across our faces, and of course we all wore beards, and they were frozen fast. The police there wanted to know what was the matter with us, if we'd gone crazy being out mushing on a day like that? We hadn't suffered any until he told us how cold it was, and then we pretty near froze to death before we got our tent up.

A: How cold was it?

HB: 65.

A: How long did it take you to get down to Dawson?

HB: 40 days on the trail.

A: You pulled a sled all that way?

HB: Yes.

A: All the way from..

HB: Skagway.

A: Skagway clear down to Dawson. About how many miles would you say that was?

HB: I don't remember; I don't know what the distance. I've often wanted to find out. I haven't any idea just exactly how far it is. We followed the river most of the way.

A: It was a long, tough trip, there's no doubt about that.

HB: It was.

A: How did you find things down in Dawson? What sort of work did you do?

HB: Well we went mining; we hired out, worked for wages, the first thing we did—getting good wages. Then as soon as we got enough money accumulated, why we bought a claim on what was known as "poverty bar". That didn't describe it excepting as it applied to our claim, we had the only 100 foot claim that didn't have any gold on it.

A: Now, Mr. Badger, will you tell me about what made you decide to leave the Dawson country and come over in this area?

HB: There was a little Jap by the name of "Wada" that came up there in 1902, in December, 1902, and told us they had discovered 9 feet of \$.25 dirt, that means 25 cents to the pan or shovelful which would make it exceptionally rich at depth. So we packed up, Grant Murdock and I, and we came down with dogs; we each had dogs coming down. We were 33 days from Dawson down here.

Intending to come to Circle where we could re-outfit, we were steered up the Forty Mile and went up there and came down the Goodpaster, down the Tanana to the head of this slough, and down the slough to Fairbanks.

A: What was the food situation down here?

HB: It was very scarce, very scarce. Captain Barnette had some food—had a lot of flour among other things, and that's one thing we were all short of. And he offered to sell that at \$5 a sack provided we'd buy a \$75 outfit. In that \$75 outfit we were required to take 3 cases of canned vegetables consisting of cabbage and beets and some other thing that was mostly water; it wasn't fit for food, any of it. But that took \$36 just for something we couldn't use in order to get a 5 pound sack of flour.

So we called a "miners' meeting", that was the highest court of the land. We had no marshals, and we had no soldiers, we had no lawyers, nothing else excepting the "miners' meeting" was the law of the land, whatever (we) they said went.

So we served notice on old "Cap" but...he'd either turn that flour loose or we'd take it. He'd suit himself about it. So the next morning there were notices over town that anyone who wanted a sack of flour could come and get it, and it would cost him \$5.

There was an immediate line formed on Front Street that walked in one end of the store and out the other with each man with a sack of flour on back, until his stock was pretty well depleted.

A: Then Captain Barnette hadn't disturbed or had any difference with the word of the miners — that was the law.

HB: Oh, that was the law; everybody abided by that.

A: I think the miners also had something to say about the Jap, "Wada" his name was, wasn't it? About his bringing the news over to Dawson about this strike here.

HB: Well you see, when we came down here and we went out on the creeks to see about this big strike, it hadn't been developed yet. They had a couple of holes — Pedro had a couple of holes down on his creek, and he let us go down in the hole and scrape up a pan of dirt, up in the dirt above bedrock there wasn't anything, just colors. And on bedrock we'd get a 3 cent pan, that wouldn't pay at all. The same way on McCarty's claim down on Goldstream; they had no definite amount of pay, and it looked like a false alarm. The consequence was that while there were hundreds of people came in, there were hundreds going out. Just as soon as the water runs so they could get away, they started going back by the hundreds.

Anytime you'd see a man whittling, starting to whittle on the bank of the river down here, you'd know he was on his way, he was going to sail in a day or two.

Grant Murdock went back to Dawson, and I stayed here. I said "There's a lot of hills that haven't been prospected; looks like a good place to stay. I'm going to stay and see what it looks like."

During the summer they made the strike on Fairbanks Creek, 8 above Discovery. That's the first authentic one that we got word of, here in town. We went out to have a look at it, and we asked questions of the owners, and they ordered us off. (They said) "Get off of here, and don't come back."

So Bob and I went Bob McChesten (?) went up on the hill, sat down and ate our lunch, and talked it over. We just stayed there until they went to bed.

We went down and got a handkerchief full of dirt and took it up and panned it in a greasy frying pan and got 2 ½ out of it. So we decided that it was paydirt. Same thing happened on Cleary Creek when the report came in they struck a discovery claim at the mouth of Wolf Creek. He and I went out there, and I happened to know the man who was running a "long Tom" hoisting out of the hole, running a "long Tom". Asked him what it was like, his long (?). He said wait until I get this hopper empty and I'll show you something. He took the hopper off and that "long Tom" which is about 5 or 6 feet long was just a string of gold. He said, "We have to clean up every 2 hours and a half."

So we came to town and opened up real estate office.

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A: How did you do in the real estate business?

HB: Oh, did fine for a while. Spent most of it grub staking people.

A: You know, you told me an interesting story too, about a shooting, a fray, I suppose it was one of many in those times.

HB: No, there wasn't very much of it; it was very rare that there was anything of that kind happening. It was the only one that we really had here that was serious. That was because they really was here when you staked a lot, you recorded it with the town recorder, and you had to put a cabin on that within 30 days. And if you couldn't build it, if you run out of food and had to go to Circle which was the closest place to go, you got a 30 day leave of absence from your town recorder. That meant that that ground was there when you come back within the 30 days.

Alec Koots had put up a cabin on his ground, all excepting putting on the roof and putting in the doors and windows, and then went and got a 30 day leave of absence, went to Circle after food. And Billy Dunkel was the town recorder at that time, and I guess Billy got hard up and got to drinking a little bit or something of the kind, and got a chance to sell this cabin and lot to another guy which he did.

So when Kootz came back, somebody had his cabin all finished and had moved in, was living on it. So he went and hunted up Dunkel, and he gave him a real old fashioned thrashing. He just hit him, a good beating, beat him up plenty.

Then he went and started drinking, and after he got drunk he thought he'd been damaged too much, and was going to give Billy some more of it, and he went got a pick handle, said he was going to beat his head off. Billy ran into George Noble's Saloon on Front Street, and asked George to put him away somewhere — Kootz was after him. So he did, put him in his bedroom. As he went by, back of the bar, George Noble had a big gun laying there, six gun, then he grabbed it and took it in with him.

Coots came in there to beat him up and tried to get in. And George told him "No, he isn't here". He (Kootz) said, "I know he is" and he jumped over the bar, went and kicked the door in, and as he kicked the door in Billy let him have it, shot him through the chest; it didn't kill him.

But anyway that required a miners' meeting. I happened to be the chairman of that meeting. The verdict was that the first licking he got, he deserved, had it coming, that was all right. All was fair up to there.

But he also had a right to protect his life when the man had threatened in everybody's presence that was going to beat his head off, he had the right to defend himself, and so Coots got just exactly what he had coming, and that was the end of it, it was thrown out of court.—forgotten right.

A: Well, Harry, up to this point we've looked back into the history of this part of this part of the country, and in as much as in later years you have been particularly interested in agriculture, I wonder what you have to say about the future of this section? What do you think the Tanana Valley will be like from a farming standpoint, oh say 50 years from now?

HB: It will be covered with farms just as thick as the state of Minnesota is now.

A: I see, what type of farming?

HB: There will be the general farming such as we have now, the raising of food stuffs and cattle. There's any amount of ground here that is suitable for cattle raising, and they can raise all the feed that they need for them.

A: I see. Briefly, I understand that you've also been sent to Juneau on a number of occasions for the Legislature?

HB: Well, I went down there one session, 1945.

A: And you're still hard at it, farming out on what is known as "Badger Road."

HB: Yes.

A: Thank you ever so much for visiting the studios for "Here's a Pioneer". Friends, you've listened to an interview with one of Alaska's genuine old timer, Harry Badger who came to the country in 1900. "Here's a Pioneer" is brought to you by the Pioneer Cab Company with the compliments and best wishes of manager Joe Coble and the staff. And remember, any time you wish a cab the number is East 10A, or the cab stand is located across from the Nordale Hotel. Be with us again for another presentation of "Here's a Pioneer" next Wednesday evening at 7:30.