

YUKON ARCHIVES TEXTUAL RECORDS TRANSCRIPT

Item Title: Up The Yukon to Dawson City
Title Note: Title taken from A.C. Bruce-Pryce's letter to Joseph Edward Whitehouse, 1898
Transcriber: Cataloguer
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Abstract

A 6-page letter handwritten in 1898 by A.C. Bruce-Pryce to Joseph Edward Whitehouse, both men were living in England at the time. Bruce-Pryce recounts their sons', Edward M. Bruce and Samuel Joseph and Joseph Edward Whitehouse, 6-week trip up the Yukon River from St. Michael, Alaska to Dawson City, Yukon during the Klondike Gold Rush in 1898.

Edward M. Bruce, who left England on May 11, 1898, shipped a steam launch, the *Wyvern*, and his outfit in a separate boat to St. Michael, Alaska. He made the trip up the river to Dawson City with Samuel Joseph (known as Jack and S.J.) Whitehouse and Joseph Edward (known as Ed) Whitehouse and four other men - Sydney, Dorkins, Humphries, and Du Rocher.

The letter, with excerpts taken from Edward M. Bruce's letters home, describes their work preparing the boat for travel while at St. Michael harbour, hunting bears, geese and ducks, the challenges of travelling on the river (the boat ran aground on Calamity Bar), and mentions the communities of St. Michael, Rampart City, Fort Yukon, and Circle City. The group arrived at their destination in early September 1898 and Edward M. Bruce describes Dawson City as having approximately 50,000 people living in the area and mentions his plans to leave as soon as possible.

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Up The Yukon to Dawson City

Sir, - You may be interested in hearing of the voyage up the Yukon which my son, Mr. Edward M. Bruce, has just made in a steam launch which he sent out from England to St Michael's [sic] on board the Garonne. He left England himself in the Lake Superior on the 11th May, and went across Canada to Vancouver. At Montreal duty had to be paid on everything £10 on a gun, £5 on a rifle, on clothes, and even on a fishing rod. At Vancouver it was the same story over again on all goods which had been sent out by the Garonne, the duty on the steam launch alone being £350; and here I may as well mention that Messrs. Chappell and Co., who acted for him, say that it is a great mistake for the people to buy their outfits in England or until they arrive at Vancouver, competition there being extremely keen, and the merchants being overstocked with every article necessary for the Klondyker. By buying in Vancouver they, besides, avoid the serious risk of goods not arriving in time. If the Garonne, for instance, had not been several days later than the day which had been fixed for her arrival, my son's outfit would not have reached Vancouver in time. However, it did arrive, and he started in her for St. Michael's. He writes on the 4th July, off St. Michael's, that the weather, which had been bad, was getting worse, and that he had just been on deck putting extra lashing on the launch. "We have a lot of United States Customs Officers going up, and they have made me an offer of £2,500 for the launch for their duty at the mouth of the Yukon, but as I have been advised that she will be worth at least 17,500 dollars at Dawson City, I have declined

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with thanks. The only fine day we had was yesterday, when four of us cleared, cleaned, and painted the launch. We began at eight yesterday morning and finished at 8.30 this morning. We worked nearly all the time, as there is no night." The next letter is dated July 20th. the Beach St. Michael's, Alaska, of which we sent several photographs. One is evidently taken from the launch's deck, and shows the camp with the two canoes on which extra coal was to be carried. The letter says: "At last we are ready to start for the Yukon. We have had a fortnight of the hardest work I ever did. There were no stevedores or men to work and shift cargo, so we had to do it all ourselves; and as we had to shift all the cargo on top, it took some work. You would hardly recognize me now, as we were coaling last night, and it is impossible to get the grime out. The delay here has been principally caused by the boat, which was filthy after [t]he voyage round America, and so were the engines. "The party consists of - Sydney, Humphries, Du Rocher, the two Whitehouses, Dorkins, and myself. Mr. Sydney was second officer on one of the river boats, and was in charge of the Garonne's cargo on the way out. Mr. Humphries who had been a miner all his life, and so had Mr. Du Rocher, a French Canadian. Both these last had been wrecked on the schooner Elise, about two months ago, and had been working their way up. Both are well known on the coast, and bear a high reputation as straight men. Mr. Dorkins is the engineer. "We are lying alongside the Research party, and I send you a photo of the launching of the boat from the Garonne. It beats me to think how they will get up the river, for they are towing t[w]o barges

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and three boats. "We had a week's fine weather on arriving, but for the last few days it has poured with rain, and is still raining. The harbour is crammed with ships, all waiting for the stern-wheelers to come up; and I should think there are 2,000 people waiting to go down. Everything is going on well. I have had another offer for the launch - this time being 15,000 dollars." The next letter was written on a half-sheet from Rampart City, Manook Creek, Alaska; and I found it on the United States chart & Map of Alaska, about half way up the Yukon, in Long 153,30W. It is dated Aug 13, and says: - "We arrived here safeley [sic] two hours ago. Awfully hard work, We push on to-night. It is my watch, and I am just snatching the chance, while we are having tea, to send a line. We have had very fine sport. We got three bears the day before yesterday, and have been given a tow up to this place for one of them. The Euoplia gun is a grand gun: I shot one Bear and wounded the other two in three shots, and Humphries and J. Whitehouse finished them. The current is very strong, and in some cases it is as much as we can do to make headway against it. However, we shall do better from here: we are now ten day's steam from St. Michael's." This letter arrived in England on 29th Sept. The next is dated from Dawson City Sept 13, and gives the account of his voyage up "My Dear Father, - Here we are, after six week's hard work, and most of us are going to part as soon as possible. The river freezes here about the end of the month. As far as I can see I shall go back to Rampart City or Forty mile, but I shall certainly not stay here. "Dawson City is an enormous place with about 50.000 inhabitants

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most of whom are now living in tents. The town is built on a swamp, and is regularly flooded with an extra three or four inches of mud in May or June, when the Ice thaws on the Yukon and on the lakes. The place, not very comfortable at best becomes even more uncomfortable then, but otherwise the difference is not very great. "To resume our voyage from my last letter. On leaving Fort Yukon we found a very strong current: in the Flats the water was very low, and the current therefore concentrated its force in the narrowed channel. "We had any amount of shooting, geece [sic] & ducks, and we saw bears, moose and caribou. I had a shot at the latter but missed. I was not exactly sorry, as we had plenty of fresh meat at the time. We spent twelve days in coming from Fort Yukon to Circle City. There was nothing of any great importance on the way, or of any difficulty except passing the two Bars, Ten Mile Bar and Calamity Bar. We reached ten mile Bar the first day, and pulled up, as it was late, and we wanted meat. I took the gun, and Jack Whitehouse the canoe. I soon had a couple of geese and a couple of ducks, and returned to find Swiney[Sydney?] and Jack were back too, and reported 'no passage by either bank, and a d-d strong current in the middle.' "We steamed out at ten the next morning, and did not succeed till two. However, we saw two or three boats in difficulties - hung up - so we did pretty well. We reached Calamity Bar, or as it is sometimes called, Thirty Mile Bar, three days later, and had another smash with the engine just as we reached it; we pulled up, and it took us a day to repair. "Whilst repairing I watched two of the Commercial Company's boats go through, and determined to try,

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as the passage seemed easy enough. Accordingly, we steamed out that morning with Jack, as usual, sounding. We had got about half way through with eight feet soundings, when I heard Jack - "Eight feet eight! Eight feet! Two!!! Hard astern." But it was to[o] late, there was a tearing grind, and we were on Calamity Bar, in 18 inches to three feet of water, with a 6½ knot current; and we drew 3ft 6in. aft. It took us two days of the hardest work I ever did to get her off. We had to rig block and tackles an[d] a spar and hoist her along, sometimes a yard, sometimes only six inches, for nearly 200 yards. Then at last, to take out the anchor as far as we could and bury it; this in freezing water and an awful current waist deep. You are obliged to carry the anchor and chain out bodily, as the canoes could not stem the current; then make our tackles fast to it and pull her four yards at a time across to the anchor. this had to be repeated three times and then we got her off. I enclose a small plan of the bar to explain matters. Soundings in feet; dotted enclosures, sand bars; ----- bad channel; ----- = - good channel, not used; and have marked a where we struck; b where we began hauling in the anchor; c where we got into deep water again; d the good channel; e where we put in after our breakdown. "While we were lying alongside the bank the Clara came up, and as I owed her a good turn for the tow she had given us up to Rampart City, I went on board and pointed out the good passage, with seven feet soundings, and strongly advised them to take it; but their pilot 'knew a darned sight more than any Britisher,' and take the other they would; the result being that they ran aground exactly where we had, and had to pay

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£200 to be pulled off another boat. I cleared my papers at Circle City and arranged for a tow up to Dawson City for 250 dollars, as we were all tired and done up. Mr. Williams, of the Standard Oil Company, very kindly guaranteed my cheque, and we arrived here two days ago. I found your letter awaiting me, but no papers, which was a pity, as I could have sold the pink Un^[1] for anything between 5 and 20 dollars. I am selling the launch for £7.500 - from which commission &c, will have to be deducted. - Your affectionate son, Edward M. Bruce

I may explain that I sent the papers, Pink Un included, addressed to Dawson City, registered; and that they have been returned to me from Winnipeg, as the Post Office refused to forward registered matter to Klondyke. I had taken the precaution of registering, as papers worth ½^d. 1^d. 2^d. in England and worth 5 to 10 dollars out there, might possibly miscarry; my son's letters to me from St. Michael's and from Dawson City were both registered. I have since had other newspapers returned from Victoria with a printed stamp on them saying that only letters are forwarded in the Klondyke mail. There are no less than twelve sternwheelers, with gold, &c., on board, on the sand-banks of the Yukon, which there is no chance of floating this year. They will be caught by the ice and broken to pieces in the Spring when the ice begins to thaw and to come down -

Your obedient servant,
A C Bruce-Pryce

[End of Transcript]

[¹ (slang, chiefly Britain) a newspaper supplement or edition concerning sport, especially football, printed on pink newsprint.]