

MOCCASIN TELEGRAPH – SPECIAL EDITION – DAWSON 1962 – November 19, 2003

Memories of Dawson City 1962

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Does anyone remember the Dawson City Festival of 1962, when Business people and various levels of government got together and decided to make Dawson into a tourist Mecca? Mega bucks was spent on refurbishing some of the old gold rush buildings including the rebuilding of the old Palace Grand Theatre on its original location and to its exact original design and quality. A special stage play called “Foxy” was produced depicting the Klondike gold rush days and old time actor Bert Lahr was hired to play the lead role.

I was working for the National Employment Service in Whitehorse at the time and when Dawson requested a branch office be set up to handle recruiting for the large number of new workers who would be required to look after the influx of tourists. Because of my former police service there, I was selected to go and set up an office. Since it was summertime, Blanche and our three children, aged four to seven came along with me. The office was set up in a room at one end of the old Government Administration Building and a couple of adjoining rooms set up as an apartment. We felt pretty safe there as at the other end of the building they set up barrack rooms for approximately thirty young RCMP constables who were brought in from all over the country to take care of crowd control, traffic control etc. All arrangements were well planned except for one thing. While our little apartment was equipped with a toilet and sink, the only showers available were in the R.C.M.P. barracks. This was ok for me, but whenever Blanche wanted a shower I would have to go down and check out the shower room and then stand guard while she took care of the necessities. She was the envy of all the young ladies suffering from “Scarlet fever”.

The museum occupied part of the same building and as a special for the festival summer they had a display of the crown jewels of England. I would assume that they were replicas but they did look quite impressive.

Blanche and the kids really enjoyed it there. Since there was little housework to do, Blanche had lots of time to visit her old haunts and old friends, Dawson being her hometown. And the kids spent their days playing in the old locomotive engines, which were still out in the yard at that time.

While there I had occasion to meet Max Ferguson. Old-timers will remember him as “Old Rawhide” of C.B.C. Radio. He was in town to cover the story for C.B.C. and wanted someone to take him around the creeks to get some “colour” for his story. I took him out there and introduced him to Pat and Pete Brady, a couple of old prospectors who had been there forever. We sat in the cabin and drank o.p. rum while Pat and Pete regaled him with Yukon stories. I had a heck of a time getting him out of there to get to the opening night. Max figured he could see a stage show any night in Toronto, but he would never meet the likes of Pat and Pete again.

All businesses prepared for the festival by sprucing up their premises, hiring extra staff to look after the increase in business. The whole town had an upbeat attitude toward the festival and were all chipping in to ensure its success. When the great opening day arrived the Palace Grand was, and still is, a marvel. Just a beautiful building with its bright theatre lighting, turn of the century furnishings and cozy tiered balconies. You could just imagine Arizona Charley, Joe Boyle, the dancehall girls and dangerous Dan McGrew.

Some friends arrived from Whitehorse, and we managed to obtain one of the balconies. Bert Lahr and his troupe were great. The show, though a little corny, was very good. A group of us did manage to upset the cast a little. During the intermission about twenty of us went next door to the Pearl Harbour for a drink. Maybe we had two because when we got back to the theatre they had locked the door. No problem though, this being the Yukon, we just hammered on the door until they had to open up and let us in to our seats.

As everyone knows, Dawson did go on to be a major tourist attraction, but this was not the time. After a few weeks the expected influx of people did not appear. The show closed, extra employees were laid off, extra police went back to their respective detachments, we went back to Whitehorse and, hopefully the crown jewels got back to Her Majesty. However it was another great Yukon experience.

The Bonanza ‘B’ Mine, “FOXY”, and the Boiler Room

By Ralph Lortie

In the summer of '62, I was fortunate to be able to go to Dawson & work for the Festival. My job was to teach tourists how to pan for gold at the Bonanza ‘B’ Mine on Bonanza Creek. I was hired by George Murdoch, of Murdoch’s Gem Shop. It turned out to be a memorable job.

As a major part of this first summer-long Gold Rush Festival, a terrific stage production called “Foxy” was enacted at the newly-renovated Palace Grand Theatre. “Foxy” starred Bert Lahr, who most will remember as the ‘Cowardly Lion’ in “The Wizard of Oz” movie, starring Judy Garland. “Foxy” played every day, twice daily on weekends as I recall.

At the S.S. KENO, newly renovated and opened as a hotel, singer Pam Hyatt and piano-player ‘Ragtime’ Bob Darch entertained in the ‘Boiler Room’ bar.



Pam Hyatt christening the Keno in its new role as a hotel & bar, Bob Darch in his straw hat.

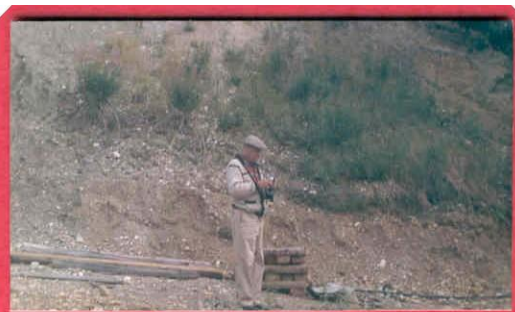
The Burians, Spike (Alfred), Robin & Margaret, operated boat tours on the river, using their big freighter canoe. Meeting them was a big treat for me, and I’ve enjoyed being in touch with Margaret again. A lot of other things went on in Dawson that summer but, being out at the ‘mine’ seven days a week, I had little opportunity to take them in. I did see “Foxy” three times, however. I regretted not having the chance to date a few of the beautiful girls in the cast, as did some of the local guys – boy, was I jealous.



Newly-renovated Palace Grand Theatre, 1962

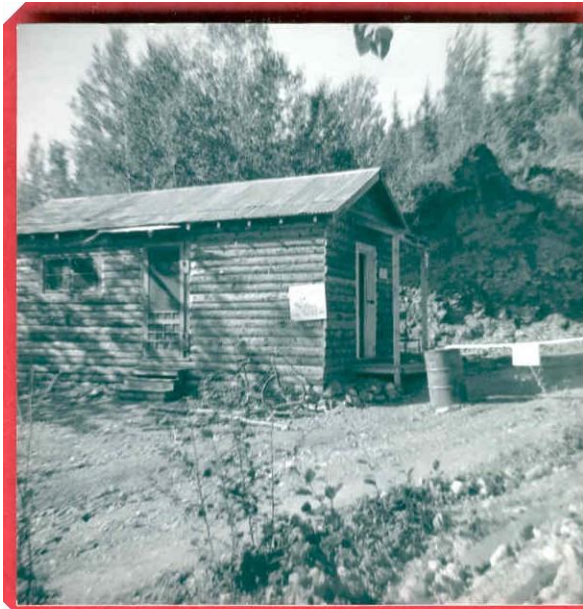
The Bonanza ‘B’ Mine had been a producer at one time, and there still was a decent paystreak left. I would help patrons dig some dirty rock and gravel from just above bedrock, then we would go and sit at one of the water-filled half-barrels to pan it out. It was great fun. Mr. Murdoch gave me some small nuggets to ‘salt’ the gravel if people were having a lean day. Some would find only a ‘colour’ or two, and be ecstatic. Others would get some large flakes, or even a planted nugget, and be disappointed.

On one day, most of the “Foxy” cast came out to try panning. I got a real thrill out of teaching Bert Lahr, Buzz Halliday, and several others how to use the pan. All in all, it was a great summer.



**Top left : my little brother Raymond and I at the Bonanza ‘B’ Mine.
Bottom left: watching patrons pan.**

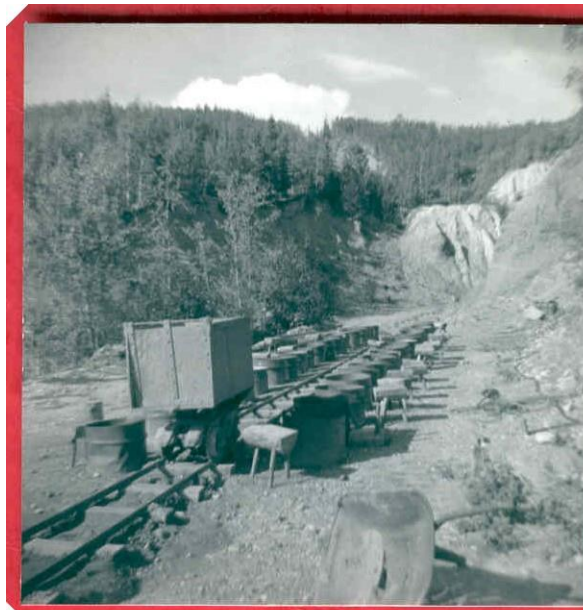
**Top right: Bert Lahr at the ‘mine’.
Bottom right: the ‘Foxy’ cast hard at work.**



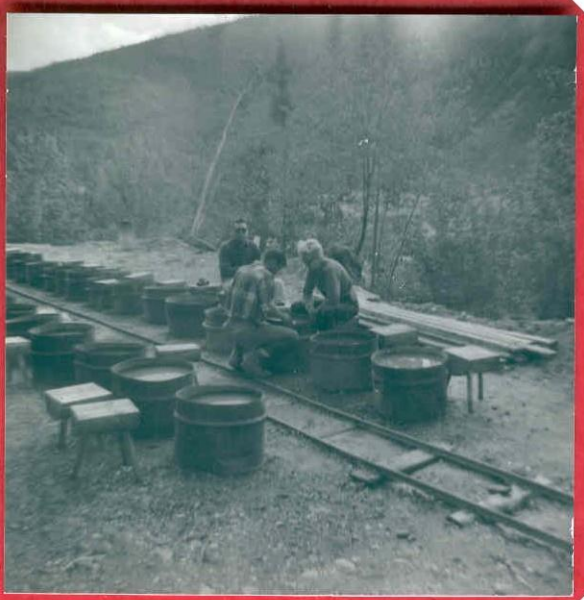
My home for the summer.



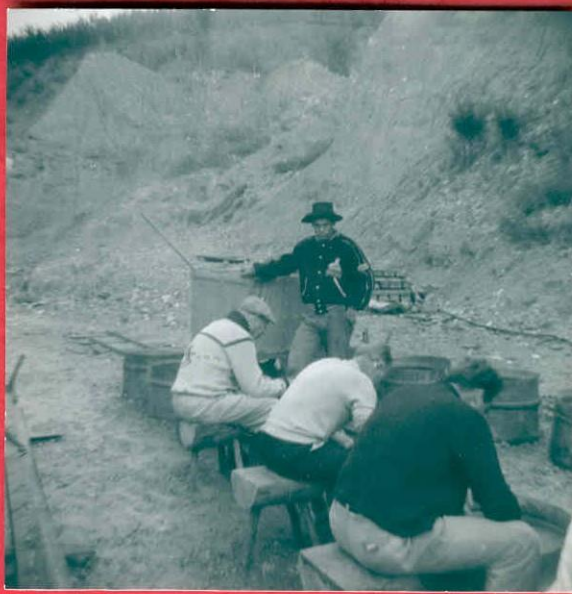
Brother Grant & I at the mine.



General view of panning area.



Me showing Buzz Halliday how to pan.



Me (wearing my Whitehorse Merchants jacket) watching Bert Lahr and other actors work their pans.



Closely watching Buzz Halliday pan for gold (I was probably looking more at her).

For more pictures about 'Foxy", click on [Foxy 1](#) , [Foxy 2](#) and [Foxy 3](#) .