

In a message dated 3/12/03 12:08:15 PM Eastern Standard Time, sherronjones@shaw.ca writes:

<< Could I please have permission to send out your story about the Basketball trip to all of those signed on to the Ex-Yukoners & Sourdoughs e-mail list? >>

Yes, send it.

Les

Winter in the Mountains, Basketball on the Coast

by Les McLaughlin

As I stuffed my black and gold basketball uniform into the cardboard suitcase, I had a sense of foreboding. With good reason. Two reasons really. First, we were heading to Alaska for a weekend series of basketball games against those dreaded long tall American teenagers who lived and died for a game I thought belonged to them. Second, we were travelling on the most unlikely railroad ever built.

If I had known then that a Canadian from the Ottawa Valley invented basketball and another Canadian, also from the valley, built the White Pass and Yukon Route railroad, I may have been less apprehensive. However, like other kids of the 50s, I thought the train and the game were American.

Friday, February 6th, 1955 was a typical Whitehorse winter morning. Clear, crisp, dark and minus 42 Fahrenheit. The train station looked like a Yukon train station should. A long spruce log building heated by a pot bellied wood stove. Outside, Engine 43, built in twenty-three, heaved a heavy haze of black diesel smoke into the dry cold air.

When I pushed open the station door, I saw our basketball coach standing beside the stove rubbing his still gloved hands over the cast iron top.

"Close the door quick, Leslie," he muttered.

Wally Malott could easily be mistaken for one of the players. Like us, he was short, young and afraid that if the train didn't get trapped in the mountains of snow in the White Pass, we'd be eaten alive by the long tall American kids on the basketball courts of Skagway.

"Winter on the White Pass is not a time or place for passengers," said the gruff looking engineer as he stepped inside the station clapping his heavy wool and leather mitts together.

He looked like he had been around long enough to know. The narrow gauge line had been built back in 1900 to deliver freight to the Klondike gold fields. The White Pass Railroad was the improbable vision of Michael J. Heney. Heney had laid a lot of steel since the summer of 1879 when, at seventeen, he ran away from home in the Ottawa Valley near Stonecliffe and headed for Lake Superior and the construction camps of the CPR where he signed on as a mule skinner and grader. In those north of Superior days he could never have imagined a railway grade like the White Pass. Straight up mostly in a country better suited to mountain goats than mules.

In 1898, when the great Klondike gold rush was at its peak, Heney was in the frightful Alaskan port called Skagway. The wild frontier town lay at the foot of the imposing White Pass. Tens of thousands of poor misguided gold seekers milled about waiting their turn to tackle the White or Chilcoot Passes by foot, eager to get to Dawson City where a fortune in gold supposedly lay on the ground ready to be picked up like chicken eggs in a henhouse.

Nothing could be further from the truth, but the would be prospectors in Skagway didn't know and Heney didn't care. He had a plan that would make their futile trip a little

more pleasant than climbing the snow filled, rock strewn, mule killing White Pass. Heney, the railroad builder was in Skagway to convince a group of wealthy British investors that not only could he built a railroad through this moon scape of solid mountain rock and snow, but that the scheme would be a money maker.

He was right on both counts and in the summer of 1900, the White Pass and Yukon Route train chugged into Whitehorse on the first of what would beuntold trips over the 110 mile long narrow gauge railway between Whitehorse and Skagway.

In just two years of construction, Heney and thousands of workers built this little railroad that travelled through some of the most inhospitable, yet beautiful land on earth. By 1900, multinational mining companies who were digging the gold ground with massive machinery controlled the Klondike gold fields. All that equipment was delivered on board the little railroad.

The White Pass company tolerated passengers on the train especially during the summer tourist season, but year round, it was a no nonsense, hard driving freight operation that delivered heavy goods first to Whitehorse, then by river boat or winter road to the Klondike.

"Train leaves in five minutes, " said the engineer. "Hope you kids enjoy the ride." It sounded like us seven high school basketball players might not enjoy the ride.

"Nice to have passengers in the winter" he said. "Don't happen often." We knew that. Summer was passenger season, not winter.

"Big blizzard on the summit last night when we were coming through to Whitehorse. The front end rotary snowplow could hardly push the stuff off the track."

Mr. Malott grabbed his gear bag and waved at us seven short, stalwart Whitehorse High School students to follow him into what passed for a passenger car. It was the caboose where the four men operating the train ate their lunch and kept warm near a pot bellied wood stove.

The train lurched forward, its steel wheels squealing and grinding in painful contact with the narrow gauge track. Steel grinding against steel at forty some below has a way of saying it is cold.

Inside the caboose, we settled into ancient hard backed wooden kitchen chairs, the kind that today would bring a fortune on the antiques road show. In 1956, they were old hard backed wooden chairs that slipped and slid over the uncovered wooden floor of the caboose.

"Hope you kids brought a lunch," said one of the trainmen.

"They were told to, said Mr. Malott. "I know I did."

"Gonna be late, " the trainman added," won't be in Skagway til midnight. Too much snow on the summit to make any time."

Eighty miles out of Whitehorse, at the highest point on the 110-mile line, the land is treeless. The snows that are older than history glow brilliant white but are dotted here and there by massive outcroppings of deep brown and pale black rock.

So far, the ride had been uneventful. We watched as the boreal forest gave way to high mountain snow-covered tundra. High in the Yukon/BC land where the mountains are nameless the slow-moving train ground to a stop.

"This is Lake Bennett stopping station but there's no one around. No one stays here in the winter." said our by now very friendly caboose riding trainman.

"You kids get off and walk around for a while, but bundle up. It's minus sixty-three here." We did. It was. A searing cold with a strange warmth pierced our parkas. We knew about Lake Bennett where Klondike gold seekers camped in tents during that dreadful winter of 1897-98 before the railroad was built, waiting for spring breakup and a chance to ride the frigid ice choked waterways down to Dawson.

The scene was surreal. Noon. The land and sky so bright as to blind you, yet the sun

still hidden behind the craggy White Pass mountains. So quiet you could hear a gray jay fly. But there were no gray jays. They all knew better than to be here, now. We stood awestruck by a land only eighty miles from our comfortable hometown of Whitehorse, yet a land so unknown to us as to be on some distant planet.

"Hasn't snowed since we came through yesterday' said the trainman. "Looks like the track will be open all the way down the hill to Skagway. Might get there on time after all."

It is twenty-five miles from the highest point of land to sea level at Skagway. Twenty-five winding miles down and around the White Pass Mountains. We hopped back into the caboose and the train lurched out of Bennett Station. Another surreal scene. A sheer rock mountain face on the left side and a sheer drop of two thousand feet on the right.

"You kids stay on the left-hand side of the train," said the trainman, "otherwise we'll tip over and tumble down that side hill."

Mr. Malott said that was impossible. But just in case, during the ride around and down the face of the White Pass mountains, he, seven basketball players and the trainman sat on wooden chairs on the left-hand side of the caboose, clinging to the window railing lest the chairs shift to the right.

My clearest memory of that trip down the side of the White Pass is a slow moving, black rock face passing by our window to the left with an occasional glimpse to the right and the white gorges from hell below. Men and mules actually climbed this Pass in the dead of winter. Such was the desperation that drove perhaps forty thousand souls to scabble and muck like a slave for the yellow metal called gold.

The big steel wheels ground to a halt on Broadway, Skagway's main street, the same place where in 1898, hell on earth flourished. The gold rush brought gold seekers all right. With them came hustlers and mugsters and other flotsam and jetsam from the lawless American wild west. Soapy Smith was the lead gangster and most notorious of a bad lot. Skagway was a place to get out of as fast as you could back in 1898. Soapy stayed and was gunned down on the wharf by a city official in a civic revolt against the madness and mayhem of crime out of control. We Whitehorse kids knew all about that. In our Yukon isolation, we thought things could not have changed much.

Yet here in 1956, at the log train station on Broadway, the Star Spangled Banner flew along side the Red Ensign. An American High School band in uniform played the Maple Leaf Forever. The long tall American high school basketball players looked down on us from withering heights and smiled a smile you could see a mile, their parents with their 1955 Chevys idling beside the station hugged and kissed us everyone.

One parent asked why we didn't have a coach. Mr. Malott smiled a gracious smile and said the coach was afraid to ride the White Pass rails in winter so we came without him.

In a brand-new school with a spanking new hardwood floor, we played the all American game against all American boys in front of an all American audience of pompon carrying cheerleaders, the high school band, and just about the entire town of five hundred hardy Skagway souls, each with their Chevy idling in front of the school. The game score was incidental and long forgotten. What is certain is that we did not win.

The closing banquet was filled with a round of rousing speeches, of gift presentations, and an announcement by the Skagway high school Principal. He said the head cheerleader would choose the Canadian team's most valuable player and, with the playing of Elvis Presley's latest hit Mystery Train, she and he would have the first dance.

The prettiest girl I had ever seen, an honest to God American beauty, chose Mr.

Malott.