

# The Rankin Diaries

BY PETER MANSFIELD

**H**OW DID I come to be in possession of the "Rankin Diaries"? A knock at my back door some weeks ago brought me face to face with a man of crumbling stature - a wasted man of arguable vitality whose hair had probably not seen the business end of comb since Einstein first landed in America. "Mr. Berton?" he wheezed, "Mr. Pierre Berton?" I nodded in the affirmative, acknowledging the pseudonym I use when writing light history.

"Thank God!" he gasped, and handed me a rather tattered looking document. In the next instant he was dead, having collapsed on my linoleum floor, his mission apparently complete. I hoped he wasn't parked at a meter.

That night I perused the historical artifacts for the first time. I was stunned. The history of the Klondike might have to be re-written for these documents, entitled "I Was Ogilvie's Chainman", comprised the diary of Jack "Gut-rot" Rankin, rear chainman to William Ogilvie during the Klondike gold rush of 1896-1899.

A note on the outside indicated that the diary had been found inside a bottle of Perry Davis Painkiller, beneath the ruins of Klondike Kitty's House of Fun and Capitulation - Rankin's home away from home, as it were.

Rankin it seems was an unstable character who had failed the priesthood because of three minor weaknesses - lust, lust and lust. Believing his life to be an unending nightmare of bad luck, misery, failure and persecution, he kept a diary if only to prove his point.

Here are some excerpts:

**January 16, 1897.** Weather mild, -43°. My first day on the job. Ogilvie wants to use moon culminations to determine the 141st meridian. I assure him that his social mores are none of my business. The small and portable astronomical transit that I am to carry some 2,000 miles across an Arctic mountain range turns out to weigh 217 pounds. I jokingly ask Ogilvie what he wants me to carry in my other hand. He tosses me a Swedish bush axe.

**January 28, 1897.** Clearing, -50°. After

a week long trek through the arctic wilderness, in which only 7 men perished, we found a stump formidable enough to mount the transit on. We built a cabin around it on the upper slopes of Frozen Carcass mountain and began taking observations. Ogilvie's decision to leave the roof off for observation purposes met with limited enthusiasm amongst the men. Is this science gone mad?

**January 30, 1897.** \*\*!#@ -87B. Woke up to find my nose frozen to the log wall. Even Perry Davis Painkiller has solidified, and the chronometer, adversely affected by the cold, has developed a cough and will not run. Skunk-mouth McNab went out early to answer nature's call but didn't return. We found him 3 hours later frozen to an icicle that had formed between his unbuttoned trousers and the ground. We tried to drag him back to camp but in the process the icicle snapped off and shattered. I began to laugh violently. What will we tell his wife?

**March 20, 1897.** Arrived in Dawson today after 2 months of hardship and deprivation. Was greeted by a mob of frantic miners, here because of Lying George Cormack's discovery in Bonanza Creek. They want the mess of claims that have accumulated straightened out. I told them I had pressing and urgent business to attend to at Kitty's, could they wait a day.

**March 21, 1897.** Sweltering, 112°. Make that a week.

**March 24, 1897.** Was astonished to find Ogilvie in Kitty's this morning. Turns out he was only here to tell me that there is a lot of work to do, could I be sober by next Wednesday. I told him I'd try.

**April 4, 1897.** Black Tuesday. Our initial survey of the claim site was completed today. Ogilvie calculated the maximum number of claims possible at 42. There are 317 registered. Perplexed, Ogilvie asked to see the survey chain used by the miners. A "survey-rope" was produced by Sludge-sucker O'Hara and a quick check revealed that it only measured 35 feet. "Who certified this?" Ogilvie asked. "Your other surveyor - Mr. Rankin" O'Hara replied. I sensed earth-tremors building beneath my boots. Ogilvie gave

me one of his looks. "Mr. Rankin is not a surveyor", he started. "He is an incompetent, immoral, unreliable and intellectually incapacitated rear chainman whose only ability lies in consummating romantic relations with the canine species." I was hurt. I thought the bit about being a rear chainman was going too far. Depressed, I went down to Kitty's for a bottle of Perry Davis Painkiller before retiring to a night of capitulation.

**May 12, 1897.** Wasn't that a party! Two days ago I met Pig-face Patterson, just in from 14 Eldorado, loaded down with gold and ready for a spree. I bet we couldn't drink every bar in Dawson dry in just 2 days. I was wrong.

Last night, with 400 friends in tow, we descended upon the Klondike Arms, the last wet hotel in town, and asked to be served. The proprietor was hesitant at first about serving such a spirited lot, but became quite obliging after Pig-face produced a 12 gauge shot-gun.

When the liquor ran out, 50 or 60 of the fellows started a good-natured free-for-all with participants limited to bare knuckles and timber-axes. Then, as is custom, we burned the saloon and hotel to the ground, just to show the proprietor our heart-felt thanks. He was moved to tears. Pig-face tossed him a nugget the size of a ptarmigan egg, then led the mob down to Kitty's where we drank some Perry Davis Painkiller before retiring to a night of capitulation.

**June 11, 1897.** Discovered another gap today. Two-below, staked by J. J. Dusel is 586 feet wide. 500 is the maximum. Ogilvie suggested that I make a claim on the other 86 feet. I said no thanks, and offered it to Dick Lowe, our axeman.

I want a full 500 foot chain, not a piddly 86 feet. How dumb does Ogilvie think I am?

**June 12, 1897.** Awoke this morning to the sound of Dick Lowe screaming "Gold! Gold!" as he danced the can-can on my wash basin. Seems he'd found the yellow stuff in that 86 foot claim I let him have, and had already taken out \$46,000 worth. "\$46,000" he shouted. "More than you'll make in a life-time working as a rear chainman." I thanked him for the information, then headed downtown in search of a Winchester with which I might remove my head. On the way I met Hog-breath McLintock who invited me over to Kitty's for some P.D.P.K. We mulled over my miserable existence, then retired to a night of capitulation. ►

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**June 21, 1897.** Awoke to find Ogilvie standing on my chest, cursing my very existence. Apparently he'd found out about the "Stake-stretchers" I've been selling on the side. I've been making good money pushing these rubber links, but the fact that they enable a Gunter's chain to be stretched to over 270 feet has Ogilvie on the edge of apoplexy. He says he'll fix me.

**June 29, 1897.** Dick Lowe's replacement arrived today - Johnny "Cut-throat" Jackson, an axeman just in from Seattle where he's wanted for murdering his room-mate who apparently snored. Ogilvie's suggestion that "Cut-throat" room with me, reduced me to a snivelling wad of useless protoplasm. "What the heck, Bill," I said in a robust voice, "let Johnny have the whole room, I'll sleep with the dogs." Ogilvie's comment that this might corrupt the dogs left "Cut-throat" in stitches. I laughed good-naturedly, all the time plotting my escape to Mongolia. To improve my thinking, I went down to Kitty's where I re-pondered my pitiful life over a bottle of Perry Davis Painkiller before retiring to a night of capitulation.

*His last apparently, for this is the final entry in the Rankin diaries. I can only conclude that either Rankin made good his escape to Mongolia, or else he snored.* ●