

UNHOLY MISERY ON THE DEAD HORSE TRAIL



Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

Collection Name:

 **Identifier:**

 **Title:**

 **Description:**

[Early Prints of Alaska. Photographs, ca. 1870-1920. ASL-PCA-297 ASL-P297-226](#)

[Take Notice!](#)

[Sign](#) in [image](#): [Take Notice! Beginning March 1 Toll](#) will be collected on [Road](#) from [near](#) the [First Bridge](#) through [White Pass](#). [G. A. Brackett](#).

[Horse](#) in [foreground](#), with [mining equipment](#), [sleds](#), and [sign](#).



Collection Name:

 **Identifier:**

 **Title:**

 **Description:**

[AMHA. John Urban Collection](#)

[AMHA-b64-1-25](#)

[Pack trains](#) on the [summit](#) of [White Pass](#).

[Title taken](#) from [front](#). [View](#) of [men](#) with [cow](#) and [pack horses](#) with [sleds](#) at [summit](#) of [White Pass](#), [British Columbia](#), on the [border](#) with [Alaska](#). [Photographer's number 2107](#). [1898](#). [Photographer: E.A. Hegg](#). [Original photograph size: 7 1/8" x 9 1/8"](#).

 **Creator:**

[Hegg, Eric A., 1867-1948](#)

A little way on[ward] three horses lie dead, two of them halfburied in the black quagmire, and the horses step over their bodies, without a look, and painfully struggle on. . . . No one knows how many people there are. We guess five thousand—there may be more—and two thousand head of horses. . . . A steamer arrives and empties several hundred people and tons of goods into the mouth of the trail, and the trail absorbs them as a sponge drinks up water. They are lost amid the gulches and trees.

— Tappan Adney, *The Klondike Stampede*, 1900

When the Klondike Gold Rush was firing up in 1897, the frontier people of Alaska and the Yukon were already somewhat dependent on horses for exploration, travel, hunting, hauling freight, and plowing fields. A hardy breed in the hands of a knowledgeable, compassionate horseman was a valuable partner. However, too often deliberate brutality and abuse through ignorance was also evident. In 1899, one mail contractor experimented with using horses to carry the mail on the trail between Valdez and Eagle. Ultimately, the three letters that were delivered cost \$3,000 and the lives of 11 horses.

Much has been written about the misery that people endured on their journey to the Klondike. However, the story of the widespread inhumane treatment of pack animals runs parallel and creates a picture of unrestrained greed that desensitized men. In the frenzy to get to the gold fields, ill-prepared stampeders bought and resold burros, mules, oxen, goats, dogs, and in the earlier Cariboo gold rush of southern British Columbia, even camels. Horses and mules were the predominant pack animals in 1897, when the White Pass, also known as the Skagway Trail, was the preferred route for those with pack animals. With little experience or concern about exposure, proper feed, or resting their horses and mules, stampeders paid royally for their animals, overloaded them, starved them, then drove them until they collapsed from exhaustion. At the border, where humane Mounties were known to shoot suffering creatures, the horses' burdens were unloaded and their weeping sores hidden by blankets, so owners could hurry back down to Skagway for yet another load. In 1897 and 1898, an estimated 5,000 gold-seekers crossed the White Pass, and as many as 3,000 horses died helping them do so.



Collection Name:

[AMHA. John Urban Collection](#)

 **Identifier:**

[AMHA-b64-1-27](#)

 **Title:**

[White Pass.](#)

 **Description:**

[Title taken from front. View of men and packtrain going up to White Pass, British Columbia from Skagway, Alaska. Photographer's number 2212. 1898. Photographer: F.H. Nowell. Original photograph size: 7 1/2" x 9 1/4".](#)

 **Creator:**

[Nowell, Frank H., 1864-1950](#)

A Ready Market

Not all horses are suitable for carrying heavy loads, but regardless of their breeding, size, age, or ability to endure the elements, every variety of horse or mule was marketed, along with other necessary supplies, to those passing through Seattle. A prospector could buy at a horse market on Second Avenue and Yesler, or pick one up for \$10 to \$25 in the commercial district, wrote Mark R. Shipley in *The Impact of the Klondike Gold Rush on Seattle*. “By early October of 1897, within three months of the onset of the gold rush,

5,000 horses had been shipped to the Far North from Seattle. Encouraged by the volume of sales, one Seattle firm ordered 4,000 burros from the Southwest,” Shipley wrote.

By Canadian law, each person headed for the Klondike gold fields was required to carry a ton of provisions—presumably enough to last a year. The Mounties wanted assurance that these foreigners would not starve because of their own lack of preparation. For a single man or woman on foot, hauling a ton of food and supplies meant making multiple, grueling trips over the Chilkoot Pass or the alternate White Pass, ferrying a fraction of the grubstake from Dyea or Skagway each time. The Chilkoot had already earned its nickname as “the meanest 32 miles in the world.” Comparatively speaking, the 45-mile White Pass was billed as a wagon trail, wide and gently sloped, and for the first few miles, it seemed that way. Further along, travelers discovered a narrow, zigzagging, muddy route, choked with boulders, people, and animals, and backed up for miles as all struggled upward to the summit at 2,865 feet, then returning for the next load.



Anchorage Museum of History & Art. Library & Archives.

Collection Name:

[AMHA. John Urban Collection](#)

Identifier:

[AMHA-b64-1-24](#)

**Title:**

[Summit of White Pass.](#)

**Description:**

[Title taken](#) from [front](#). [Group](#) of [men](#) with [supplies](#) on [sleds pulled](#) by [cattle](#) and [horses](#) at [summit](#) of [White Pass](#), [British Columbia](#), on [border](#) with [Alaska](#). [Photographer's number 243. 1898.](#)
[Photographer:](#) E.A. [Hegg](#). [Original photograph size: 7 1/2" x 9 1/2"](#).

Tappan Adney, who covered the Gold Rush as a journalist for *Harper's Illustrated Weekly* magazine and the *London Chronicle*, later published a book of his experiences titled *The Klondike Stampede*, which was released in 1900. He described the White Pass this way: "The path—if, indeed, it can be called one—twists and turns and worms its way from ledge to ledge and between the masses of boulders. Here a tree has been cut down, and we clamber over its stump. There a corduroy bridge lifts one over a brook. Men with stout alpenstocks and with packs painfully struggle upward, stopping now and again for rest. . . . Every man we meet tells of the trials of the trail."

The sight of a horse in the throes of death became commonplace, "an hourly occurrence," wrote Adney. Decades after one man trekked over the White Pass, the old sourdough told Yukon historian Pierre Berton that he could not erase one scene from his memory. He had witnessed a sickly horse fall over and die on its way to the summit. With the body stretched across the trail, there was a pause in the traffic as men stripped the horse of its load and tack. Then the waiting line of people and horses continued upward, stepping over and on the still-warm body. Upon the man's return trip, in the space of twenty-four hours, the carcass had been reduced to a head on one side of the trail and a tail on the other.

At one point along the White Pass, so many dead horses were pushed over the edge to the valley floor that their bodies formed a stinking mound in various stages of decay. The place was named "Dead Horse Gulch," and that stretch of the White Pass became known as "Dead Horse Trail." One report persists about a horse that seemed to commit suicide, deliberately bolting toward the edge of a cliff to its death on Porcupine Hill. Another account appeared in a 1957 edition of *The Alaska Sportsman* magazine, in a story retold by Jack Newman, who'd run a mule-packing operation during the Gold Rush. He shuddered to remember the day that his Nellie, a bloodied, pain-crazed mule, brayed loudly then leapt into thin air, right before his eyes, along with two barrels of contraband whiskey labeled "Flour." Added to this wretched picture, in the darkest months of

despair, when starvation was visiting the prospectors, too, some began eating dead horses. When men went insane, others wondered if they'd eaten rotten meat.

Famed Yukon author Jack London wrote of the packhorses' plight: "They died at the rocks, they were poisoned at the summit, and they starved at the lakes; they fell off the trail, what there was of it, and they went through it; in the river they drowned under their loads or were smashed to pieces against the boulders; they snapped their legs in the crevices and broke their backs falling backwards with their packs; in the sloughs they sank from fright or smothered in the slime; and they were disemboweled in the bogs where the corduroy logs turned end up in the mud; men shot them, worked them to death and when they were gone, went back to the beach and bought more. . . . Their hearts turned to stone—those which did not break—and they became beasts, the men on the Dead Horse Trail."

REMEMBERING THE FALLEN ONES



Collection Name:



Identifier:



Title:

[AMHA. General Photograph File](#)

[AMHA-b88-3-46](#)

[Monument](#) at [Inspiration Point](#), [White Pass](#) and [Yukon Route](#),
[Alaska](#).

Three decades after the peak of the Gold Rush, Florence Hartshorn was still haunted by visions of sick and dying horses. Florence was married to Bert Hartshorn, a blacksmith at a place called Log Cabin, mere feet from the White Pass Trail. In July 1898, she decided to join her husband at Log Cabin and hired a horse out of Skagway. Florence rode one of the twenty-five horses tied head to tail in Joe Brooks' pack train. The sights and smells of that trip were forever burned on her brain. Thirty years later, addressing a group of pioneer women called the Ladies of the Golden North, she said, "I was told not to drink one drop of water along the way, so I bought a half-dozen lemons. . . . Lemons would quench the thirst. Before long I knew why I should not drink from the streams, for on all sides were dead horses. Not a few, but hundreds. My pony would stop, look down, then step carefully over her comrade of the trail. . . . Out of our train of twenty-five horses, five lost their lives on that one trip. Their loads [of 200 to 250 pounds per horse] were added to the already heavy loads of the other pack animals.

"And what did I do with my lemons? I was three days on the trail. I ate the lemons and held the cupped rinds over my nose to shut out the terrible odor."

In fact, the overabundance of flies, stench of rotting horseflesh, and dangerous conditions ultimately had closed the White Pass Trail in September 1897. Later attempts to make it a toll-way failed, and packers continued to use it the following year. On May 27, 1898, construction of the 110-mile White Pass & Yukon Route railway began, and workers drove the last spike on July 29, 1900, just twenty-six months later. Just as the Gold Rush was winding down, the need for pack animals was eased.

Nearly thirty years later, Florence Hartshorn began talking about her idea: a monument to the horses and mules that died on the trail. In July 1928, she approached Charles D. Garfield, chairman of the Alaska Division of the Seattle Chamber of Commerce, then asked the Ladies of the Golden North to sponsor the plan. Her idea began to spread, and her invitation for donations appeared in newspapers across the country. Among the first to respond was former Skagway muleskinner John "Packer Jack" Newman, who had shot and killed many an injured animal and whose mule Nellie had thrown herself to her death. He sent a check for \$50 with a note of remorse: "I was there, and I must admit that sometimes I was just as brutal as the rest. We were all mad—mad for gold, and we did things we lived to regret afterward."

The Skagway Women's Club sent a donation, as did the State Humane Society of Washington, and the King County Humane Society, and a miner who tried and failed to help the cause of horses on the Chisana, Alaska, gold rush. Many others followed. As the money came in, the committee members went forward with finding a sculptor. They commissioned Seattle sculptor James A. Wehn, who was by then a high-profile artist with notable public works such as the 1908 bronze statue of Chief Seattle at Tilikum Place Park, and a 1912 bronze bust of Chief Seattle, which stands at Seattle University on E. Madison Street and Broadway.

Wehn's final bronze plaque depicted a heavily loaded packhorse and pack mule, their heads lowered under the strain. Below them are the words of "Packer Jack" Newman, who offered this inscription: "The Dead are Speaking. In memory of us three thousand pack animals that laid our bones on these awful hills during the Gold Rush of 1897-1898. We now thank those listening souls that heard our groans across this stretch of years. We waited but not in vain."

Writer Ethel Anderson Becker retold the story of the dedication in the May 1957 issue of *The Alaska Sportsman*, recalling how dignitaries, donors, and other pioneers had joined a large sailing party that left Seattle on August 20, 1929, headed for Skagway and the monument dedication ceremony. Four days later, on August 24, 1929, some 200 people boarded the White Pass & Yukon Route railway in Skagway to reach Inspiration Point, high above Dead Horse Gulch. There, Florence Hartshorn, representing the Alaska Yukon Pioneers and the Ladies of the Golden North, unveiled the monument to applause and cheering in a gesture that she later remembered as "the happiest moment of my life."

A dignitary read a note of regret from Packer Jack Newman, who was unable to attend. "I am with you in saddened spirit," he wrote. "After thirty years I can still hear the hills echo with the sound of gold-crazed men."



Centennial Park, Skagway, Alaska, May 2006
Photo courtesy White Pass & Yukon Route

A New Home for the Monument

The sacrifices of the pack animals might have been forgotten if not for Florence Hartshorn and Packer Jack Newman. For decades, the memorial that was unveiled in 1929 stood as a solitary reminder at Inspiration Point, season after season, in a place that was virtually inaccessible except by train and buried in snow each winter. In winter months, the railroad employed huge rotary engines to clear snow from the tracks, however, in more recent years they began using Caterpillar equipment, and there was concern that the monument would be damaged. So railroad employees protected the

bronze plaque by removing it each fall and reinstalling it each spring. That changed for good in the late 1990s.

Today the plaque is in a public place—in Skagway’s Centennial Park, right behind the White Pass & Yukon Route depot—where, since 1997, thousands of visitors have read the grim words of Packer Jack Newman and tried to imagine a time when mules and horses died daily . . . and the hills echoed with “the sound of gold-crazed men.”

FIND IT:

Longitude and Latitude of Dead Horse Gulch (for those with maps or GPS):
Dead Horse Gulch: N 59.35.886, W 138.08.828

LINKS:

Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park

“Hard Drive to the Klondike”: www.nps.gov/klse/hrs/hrs1b.htm

“Educators Resource Guide to the Klondike Gold Rush of 1898”:
www.nps.gov/klse/Resource_Guide.htm

The Postal Museum:

www.postalmuseum.si.edu/gold/trail.htm

The Alaska State Library, “Gold Rush Stories”:

www.library.state.ak.us/goldrush/STORIES/mail.htm

Canada’s Digital Collections, “Canadian Gold Rushes”:

http://collections.ic.gc.ca/heirloom_series/volume5/328-335.htm

University of Oregon Libraries Historic Photographs Collection, Florence Hartshorn:

<http://libweb.uoregon.edu/speccoll/photo/fhartshorn.html>

University of Washington Libraries Collections, Packer Jack Newman Photographs:

www.lib.washington.edu/SpecialColl/findaids/docs/photosgraphics/BernsJohnPHColl504.xml

White Pass & Yukon Route history:

www.wpyr.com/history/index.html

Visit the library for more information:

Alaska's libraries include plenty of audio, visual, and written material about the Trail of '98. Visit your local library or go online to see what's available in holdings all over the state. Take these simple steps:

1. Access **SLED** (State Library Electronic Doorway) at <http://sled.alaska.edu/library.html>.
2. Click on the listing for **ALNCat** (the Alaska Library Network Catalog) to view the Basic Search window.
3. Go to the Keyword field, and type in **KLONDIKE GOLD RUSH**.