

Alaskans / Explorers and Adventurers

By Jennifer Houdek

KLONDIKE KATE
"Queen of the Yukon"
1876-1957



Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

Burlesque entertainer Klondike Kate dazzled gold-rush audiences with her risqué costumes, exceptional beauty, and genuine talent. Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Collection Name: Barrett Willoughby Collection, 1900-1958
Identifier: UAF-1972-116-335
Title: Klondike Kate wearing a leotard
Description: Photograph of Klondike Kate. Attached caption reads: "We wore tights in those day. If we hadn't the Mounted Police would have run us out of the country."



Dawson City's Savoy is decked out for a dance hall social on December 9, 1900. Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

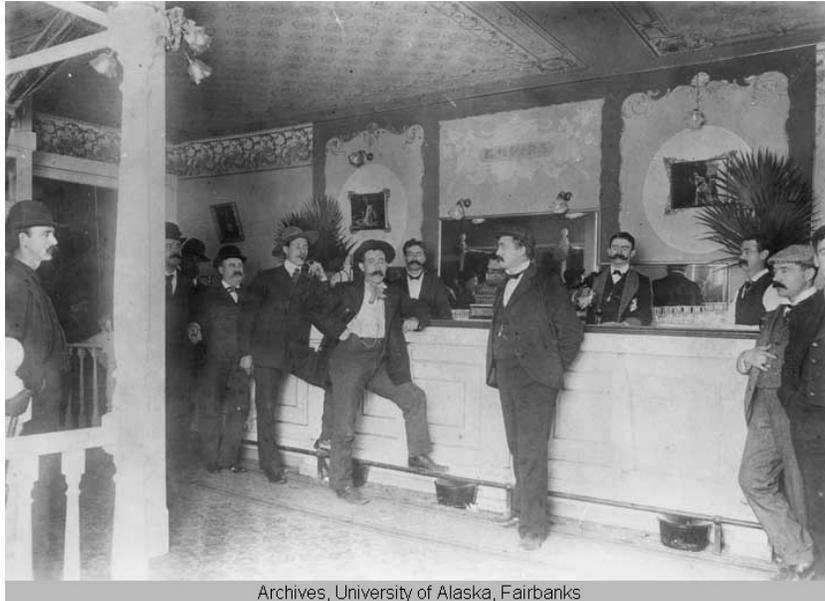
Collection Name: Barrett Willoughby Collection, 1900-1958
Identifier: UAF-1972-116-337
Title: The Dance Hall of the Savoy on a gala night

 **Description:**

Title taken from caption. Photograph of a dance hall social that took place December 9th, 1900 in Dawson, Yukon Territory.

 **Creator:**

Larss & Duclos



Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

At first Klondike Kate disliked that part of her job that required hustling drinks from the patrons, but she was good at it. This photo of the Savoy Bar interior shows the end of the bar where dance hall girls returned their partners after a dance. Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Collection Name:

Barrett Willoughby Collection, 1900-1958

 **Identifier:**

UAF-1972-116-343

 **Title:**

The Savoy Bar

 **Description:**

Description taken from verso. Photograph of one end of the Savoy Bar, the end where the dance hall girls would return their partners after the dance.

http://www.yesnet.yk.ca/schools/carcross/klondike_women_pages/klondike_kate.htm



Klondike Kate was in her 70s for this 1943 portrait.



In her later years, Klondike Kate was known around Bend, Oregon, as "Aunt Kate." Here she deftly rolls her own cigarette. Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Collection Name:

Barrett Willoughby Collection, 1900-1958



Identifier:

UAF-1972-116-340



Title:

Klondike Kate rolling a cigarette



Description:

Title created by cataloger. Title created by cataloger.
Photograph of Klondike Kate. An attached caption reads:
"Klondyke Kate, of Dawson, is today Aunt Kate of Bend,
Oregon."



Creator:

Kennell-Ellis

*“Gold, Gold, Gold! Everybody talked about it,
and Alaska, the Yukon, the North. I itched to go.”*

— Klondike Kate Rockwell

More about Klondike Kate:

Kathleen Eloisa Rockwell, better known as “Klondike Kate,” lived a tumultuous life that led her throughout North and South America as she worked at jobs ranging from kindergarten teacher to chorus girl to dishwasher. Born in Junction City, Kansas, in 1876, she earned her place in gold-rush history as a beautiful, talented, and flirtatious stage dancer during Dawson’s peak years. Engaged more than 100 times, married at least three times, and ever on the move, Kate thumbed her nose at the mores of her era, unashamed of who she was or the choices she made.

It’s not surprising that Kate had a rebellious streak. Both of her parents defied Victorian standards by divorcing their first spouses to marry each other, a union that likewise ended in divorce. By the time Kate was five, her mother Martha had remarried once more, and the family moved to Spokane, Washington. Ten years later, when Kate was fifteen, Martha found herself—again—divorced. Fleeing the gossips of Washington state, Martha took Kate with her to Chile, where Martha’s adult son was living.

On the 87-day cruise, young Kate attracted the attentions of many a naval officer and, to Martha’s chagrin, even became engaged to one. This would be the first of more than a hundred marriage proposals that “Klondike Kate” would receive. Upon landing in South America, Martha ended the engagement and promptly put Kate into a chaperoned convent school. The effort did not deter Kate from accepting another marriage proposal, however, this time to a young diplomatic attaché from Spain.

“I got a job teaching kindergarten in Valparaiso, Chile,” she later told biographer Rolv Schillios. “A North American girl was a novelty. That’s when I started getting my first proposals. I was just a kid and answered ‘Si’ to everything. In short time I had seven engagement rings in my desk, and I was engaged to seven different good-looking South American amigos at the same time when the school superintendent found out about it. I had to give all those rings back.”

Three years later, Martha returned to the United States and Kate soon joined her in New York. Now 18, Kate arrived to find her mother broke and without work. After a few attempts to find a job as a store clerk or a model, Kate answered an ad for chorus girls. “No experience necessary,” it read. The job was brief because the company flopped, leaving Kate stranded in Pittsburg and trying to hitch a ride home. She remembered those rough-and-rowdy times in a positive light, as giving her a “taste of chorus girl life.”

Other chorus-line jobs followed until she heard from a former classmate in Spokane, who invited her to come work in “continuous vaudeville.” Kate learned that singing and dancing were not the only job requirements; she also would be hustling drinks. As distasteful as it was, Kate stuck around to pay off her debts and in time, she grew to enjoy the work.

Kate Rockwell was in the right place at the right time when gold fever began its furious sweep across the United States, and she was captivated by it herself. On the morning of July 17, 1897, headlines of the Seattle and Portland newspapers read “A Ton of Solid Gold - Off for the Clondyke - A Rush To The North - All Daft Over Gold.”

“Gold, Gold, Gold!” Kate remembered as an old woman. “Everybody talked about it, and Alaska, the Yukon, the North. I itched to go.”

In short order, Kate and fellow dancer Gertie Jackson quit the Spokane show, resettled Martha in Seattle, and took off for the North. By the time the ship reached Victoria, B.C., however, Gertie developed cold feet and headed back south. Kate, who’d teamed up with three other entertainers, stayed on, then found herself solo by the time she reached Bennett. She decided to press on and attempted to tap dance her way to Whitehorse. Unfortunately, she encountered another obstacle: the onset of winter. The North-West Mounted Police would not permit women to go further, declaring it too dangerous. In true “Klondike Kate” form, she donned boys’ clothing and jumped aboard a scow headed to Whitehorse. Before long, she was headed southbound again. Kate set out for Victoria, B.C., with plans to join a burlesque and musical comedy troupe that was forming to entertain at Dawson.

“The Savoy Theatrical Company had 173 members and was the largest company that ever went into the Klondike,” she told her biographer. “We opened in 1900. . . .

Dawson at the time had just had one of its disastrous fires and was being rebuilt. . . . I was slightly disillusioned that the streets [in Dawson] were not made of gold. But there were men and how they did ogle. I gave them a little extra in my smile as we headed for the large, two-story theater building that was to be as exciting to me as to the men who came in.”

In a time when even showing a woman’s ankle was considered risqué, Kate wore ballgowns and daring costumes that not only exposed her ankles and legs, but her neck and shoulders as well.

For Kate’s first act at the Savoy she wore a rose-tinted, lace-trimmed gown and an elaborate hat decorated with ostrich plumes. But it seemed that her incredible beauty and natural talent immediately set her apart from the rest of the girls. Describing Kate in *Good Time Girls*, author Lael Morgan writes, “She had natural red hair, violet eyes, long black lashes, and a splendid figure. Her face was a delicate oval of innocence in marked contrast to her husky voice, her worldly experience, and her blatant sexual appeal. Kate also had talent and grace—rare qualities among Dawson showgirls. Her special come-on was something called the ‘pixie stare,’ a projection of sweet innocence and raw sex that few men could resist, but it was her capacity for fun that ultimately won them.”

At the Savoy, Kate caught the attention of showman “Arizona” Charlie Meadows, and he offered her more money to come work at his lavish Palace Grande Theater. It was here that Kate developed her famous “Flame Dance,” which made her \$200 a week and she became the toast of Dawson. On Christmas Eve 1900, while wearing a \$1,500 Parisian gown, Kate was crowned “Queen of the Yukon.” Her fans made a crown out of a tin can and set lit candles on its jagged edges. As Kate danced, wax dripped off the candles covering her long braids. After many attempts to remove the wax from her hair, Kate decided to cut her hair into a bob, yet another moment of rebellion.

That Christmas Eve also became special for Kate with the arrival of a Scandinavian miner named Johnny Matson. Watching Kate dance that night, he instantly fell in love with her. However, Matson would have to wait more than thirty years for Kate to return his love. Unfortunately for Matson, a Greek man named Alexander Pantages entered Kate’s life at the same time.

He was born Percales Pantages but changed it to Alexander after Alexander the Great. He had escaped his native country and landed in America while recovering from malaria. Alex had no trouble finding work in a beer garden and as a prize-fighter, then discovered the theater, quickly moving from usher to entertainer. It was during this time that he heard news of the Klondike stampede and, like thousands of others, in 1898 he headed North.

By the time Pantages got to Skagway, he was broke but soon regained his nest egg working as a swamper and waiter in Charlie Meadows' Monte Carlo. It was here that he met Kate Rockwell. Soon they were a couple, even openly living together in defiance of the social standards of the times.

Life was good for Kate. Gold flowed freely through Dawson. Her lingerie was handmade in France and she wore only the most elegant, expensive gowns. In spite of her numerous admirers and pleas from colleagues to concentrate on her dancing, she was completely focused on Alex. In retirement, she remembered their days together as filled with laughter, dancing, and hard work. "We opened [the Old Orpheum] together and it became the brightest spot north of the International Boundary Line. In the spring we'd go picking poppies together on the banks of the Klondike. And we'd make plans for the day when we would later marry."

Yet as suddenly as it began, by 1902 the relationship was suffering. It's not clear what broke them up, but Kate and Alex were apart for long periods between 1902 and 1905. He settled in Seattle to create a national theater chain, while Kate went to Texas to dance, and there she even had a brief interlude with a gambler. Although Alex Pantages took her back, the damage was done. Their relationship officially ended on March 12, 1905, when Alex married Lois Medenhall, a violin player from his Seattle theater.

Kate was devastated when she got the news. Fueled by anger and hurt, she filed a breach-of-promise lawsuit against Pantages two months later. Kate sought \$25,000 for damages as well as money she had invested in Alex's theaters. The case dragged on for more than a year. Tired and heartbroken, Kate settled out of court in April 1906 for less than \$5,000. Elsewhere in the country, that was a respectable sum, however in Dawson, one night's performance would have earned Kate \$750. Despondent and weary, she accepted the settlement.

For Kate, Dawson was a constant reminder of Alex and she was drinking heavily. Using her settlement money, she moved to Fairbanks, opened a hotel, and starred at the Floradora nightclub. When the hotel burned down, she left Alaska for good in 1907, penniless again. Back in the States, Kate worked for a bit as a vaudeville headliner and even teamed up with roller-skating champion Jimmy Ray. However Kate's depression grew deeper and by 1914 a knee injury caused her to leave the stage forever. She suffered a nervous breakdown and on doctor's orders, she left Seattle and moved to the quiet Oregon country, opening a new chapter in her life.

In central Oregon Kate worked a variety of jobs such as washing dishes, operating a rooming house, and running a convalescent home. Although the work was menial, she remained queenlike. She later recalled, "All this time I managed to hang onto my memory-loaded jewelry. I can remember the queer looks on the faces of customers, seeing me up to my elbows in soap suds, with a thousand dollars' worth of diamonds in each ear."

A few years later, an optimistic Kate bought a restaurant, then decided that she might do better in California. It was an unwise move, and she found herself jobless and penniless, even driven to approach Alex Pantages for money. He gave her all that he had in his pockets: six dollars. With the money from Pantages, and some that she'd earned from waitressing, she made her way back to Oregon.

Ironically, that would not be the last time that Kate would encounter Alex Pantages. In 1929, Lois Pantages was arrested for second-degree manslaughter for killing a man while driving intoxicated. Soon thereafter, the Pantages were back in the news when Alex was charged for assaulting and raping a seventeen-year-old girl who had come to his office for a job. Kate found herself thrown back into the public eye when the District Attorney subpoenaed Kate as a character witness against Alex. However, before Kate ever made it to the witness stand, the case wrapped up and Alex was sentenced to fifty years at San Quentin. Although he was acquitted after serving only two years, Alex suffered a heart attack and huge financial loss, and never fully recovered from either. Alexander Pantages died five years after his release from prison.

Back in Oregon, Kate finally married—briefly—a young, handsome cowboy named Floyd Warner. In 1933, single again, Kate received a letter from an old admirer

from her Dawson days: Johnny Matson. His neighbor had brought him a copy of the paper portraying the story of the Pantages trial and Kate's role. Matson had never left the Yukon, nor had he ever stopped loving Kate. In his letter he proposed, and on July 14, 1933, the couple was married Vancouver, B.C.

Johnny would not have Kate staying with him on his claim during the winter, believing it was too dangerous and too remote should anything happen to her. The couple agreed that Kate would visit him in the summer and then return to the States during the harsh Yukon winters. Although Johnny looked forward to the day he would make his strike and retire with Kate in the States, it was to never come. In 1946, Kate suffered yet another loss when Johnny Mattson's body was found on a frozen trail seven miles from his cabin.

Not long after Johnny's death, Kate heard from another former admirer. His name was W. L. Van Duren, an accountant whom Kate had nursed back to health in 1930 at her Oregon convalescent home. Two years later, in 1948, they were married in Vancouver, Washington.

"Klondike Kate" Rockwell Warner Matson Van Durendied peacefully in Oregon in 1957, but her legend and stories are still very much alive. In Dawson she was the "Queen of the Yukon," the beautiful and seductive entertainer of the gold rush. Yet to the people of central Oregon where she lived out her elderly years on her quiet farm, she was simply "Aunt Kate." But it was her enthusiasm for adventure and her ability to live life without regrets that makes her stand out. At the end of Kate's life, she recounted her many adventures for her published memoir. *Any regrets?* biographer Rolv Schillios asked. She thought for a while, Schillios wrote, then shook her head no.

"I wouldn't have known what I know now if I hadn't lived the way I have."

Dawson Weekly News

January 7, 1947

R.C.M.P. Return with Bad News

After 26 days on the trail, during which time they encountered some of the severest weather of the winter, Const. Wilf Lee R.C.M.P. and his guide Johnnie Sestak, returned to Dawson December 27 after completing a 200-mile round trip patrol to Matson Creek where they buried the remains of the late, pioneer Yukoner placer miner and trapper.

Thus ends one of the year's most unusual sagas of the northern wilderness. Perturbed because she had no word from her miner husband who was supposed to "come outside" this summer, Mrs. Kate Rockwell Matson, widow of the late pioneer, flew in here late last fall to ascertain the fate, if any, that might have befallen her husband. Joe Sestak, experienced Sixtymile trapper and woodsman, whose cabin is about thirty miles away from Matson's and who was his closest neighbour, made a trip to the old timer's cabin, fifty miles up the Sixtymile, shortly before the close of navigation. Joe returned with the tragic news that he had found Matson's body, mutilated by animals at one of his smaller trapping cabins, 8 miles from his main headquarters. Mrs. Matson received the news here in Dawson and knowing that she could do nothing further, returned to her home at Bend, Oregon.

. . . John was to have joined his wife outside this past summer. But the winds of fate had other plans. The oldtimer was destined to remain forever in the country that he loved, his remains interred on the bench overlooking his lonely cabin where he'd made his home these past forty years or more. He most likely would have wanted it that way.

LINKS:

Klondike Kate biography:

http://library.thinkquest.org/11313/Gold_Rush/kate.html

About Kate's former home is Dawson:

www.klondikekates.ca/about.htm

The "other" Klondike Kate:

www.yesnet.yk.ca/schools/carcross/klondike_women_pages/klondike_kate.htm

More about Alex Pantages:

www.vancouverhistory.ca/archives_pantages.htm

www.historylink.org/essays/output.cfm?file_id=2999

The Royal Society of Klondike Kates, St. Paul, Minn.:

www.klondikekates.org/aboutus.html

“Klondike Kate” Film:

www.imdb.com/title/tt0036079/fullcredits

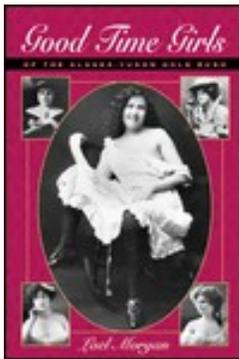
Visit the library for more information:

Alaska’s libraries include audio, visual, and written material about Klondike Kate and Dawson City, Yukon. Visit your local library or go online to see what’s available in holdings all over the state. Take these simple steps:

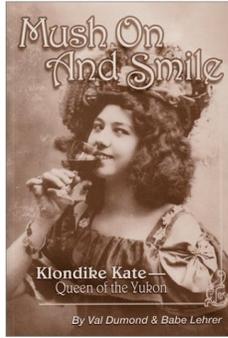
1. Access **SLED** (State Library Electronic Doorway) at <http://sled.alaska.edu/library.html>.
2. Click on the listing for **ALNCat** (the Alaska Library Network Catalog) to view the Basic Search window.

Go to the Keyword field, and type in **KLONDIKE KATE** or **DAWSON CITY**.

Recommended Reading:



Morgan, Lael. *Good Time Girls of the Alaska-Yukon Gold Rush*. Fairbanks: Epicenter Press, 2002.



Dumond, Val. *Mush On and Smile: Klondike Kate, Queen of the Yukon*. Tacoma, Wash.: Muddy Puddle Press, 2002.

Holloway, Samuel D. *Klondike Kate*. Whitehorse: Lone Wolf Press, 1987.