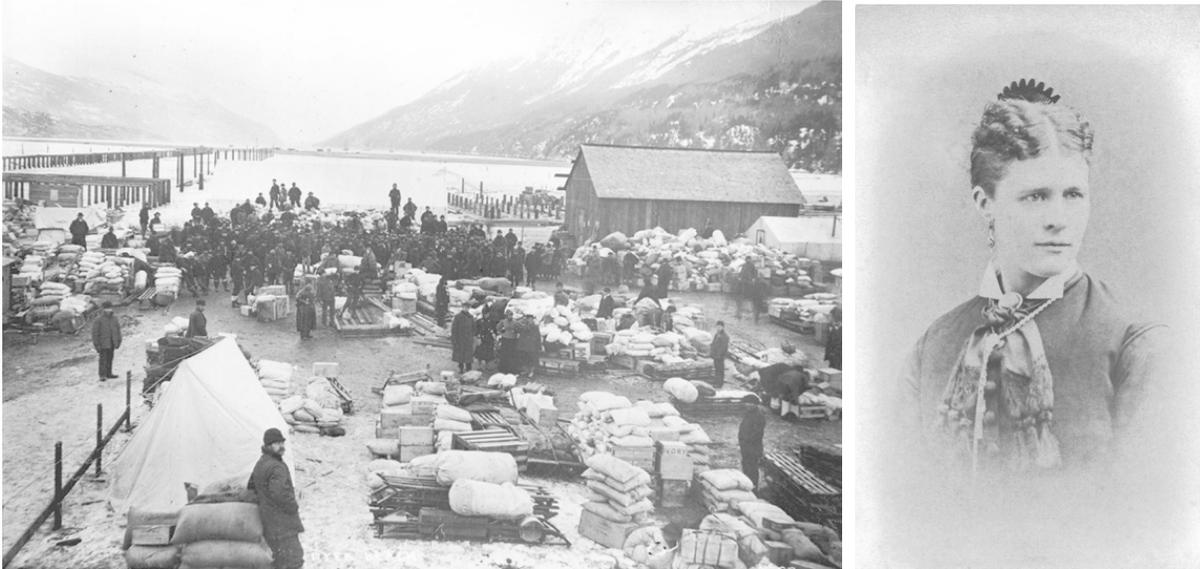


Our History: Philanthropist with an intrepid heart of gold

Nellie Cashman was both a savvy businesswoman and a kind soul

Thora Kerr Illing / .



Dyea Beach, Alaska, 1897. Image D-04430 Courtesy of Royal B.C. Museum and Archives Photograph By Royal B.C. Museum and Archives

While demure ladies wore tight corsets and entertained one another at tea, the intrepid Nellie Cashman (1845-1925) trekked for hundreds of miles through blizzard conditions to deliver food and supplies to trapped miners in northern B.C. A well-loved miner, a savvy entrepreneur and a generous philanthropist, Cashman lived and worked in the roughest boomtowns in the West, but felt a particular fondness for Victoria, and was eventually laid to rest in the Ross Bay Cemetery.

By mid-February 1898, Nellie was in Victoria, outfitting for the Klondike. Though proudly American, Nellie thought she got better deals buying supplies in Victoria. The town was home to her good friends, the Sisters of St. Ann, and Nellie was always happy to see what progress had been made to the hospital she had helped to finance. The sisters had an eager interest in news from the north, knowing they were needed as nurses in a booming frontier community. Bishop Fabré of Montreal had advised the Mother House in Quebec to send St. Ann nuns to serve in the Yukon, and three sisters had been chosen. The order already had a presence in Alaska, with teaching missions in Juneau and, more recently, at Holy Cross on the Lower Yukon River and, for a time, Akulurak, on the Bering Sea.

In the waning years of the century, Victoria was a growing town of nearly 20,000 people. The Klondike quest saw a repetition of the Fraser River gold rush madness. Stampeders were mainly American. Tents of all kinds sprouted along the streets near the harbour. Hard bargaining ensued for horses, dogs, and suitable clothing.

The gold seekers also needed tents and stoves and basic mining equipment. Foodstuffs had to be purchased, too, enough to take each traveller through a winter in a distant settlement 600 miles (966 kilometres) from the coast. The usual supplies were flour, slab bacon, dried beef, rolled oats, dried fruits, potatoes, butter in cans, alcohol, coffee, tea and sugar. Wise travellers, or more probably the better outfitting merchants, knew that food, clothing and utensils all had to be double-packed in stout canvas bags and then repacked in sacks that could be managed by one person.

All the Pacific ports were competing for business. Victoria did well from the Klondike rush, offering goods at prices below the Seattle norm, with the additional advantage that stampeders would not have to pay duty on them as they crossed the passes into Canada. Wearing apparel was exempt from customs duty, but other goods were not. This was a cost that Seattle merchants tried to hide from customers.

While outfitting, the stampeders were vying for places on ships headed to Dyea and Skagway, the starting-off points for the two passes through the mountains separating the coast from the Yukon. Many of the ships were unfit for service on a route that took passengers out from the relative safety of the Inside Passage into open water with few navigation aids. Not only were many of the ships unseaworthy, they were all overloaded with prospectors, horses, mules and dogs.

Even with the local excitement, not to mention the boost to the economy, Nellie's arrival from San Francisco was noteworthy in Victoria. She stayed at Burnes House near the harbour, an impressive hotel built by an Irishman, Tommy Burnes. Miners she had known in the Cassiar, now settled in Victoria, came round to shake her hand and talk about the old days. A reporter for the Victoria Daily Colonist was sent to the hotel, and the paper ran his interview under the heading "Miss Nellie Cashman the first white woman in Cassiar's mines visits Victoria."

The story ran: "She is out now for a big stake, nothing more or less than the motherlode of the far-famed Klondike region. She says if her experience in quartz mining will stand her in good need and her proverbial good luck in mining matters stays with her, she will have a chance at least to stake out a few claims in the mountains of gold which is thought to enrich all the north."

Nellie encouraged the reporter to ask how she would dress on the expedition and answered her own question, telling him: "Well, in many respects as a man does, with long heavy trousers and rubber boots. Of course when associating with strangers, I wear a long rubber coat. Skirts are out of the question up north, as many women will find out before they reach the gold fields."

The reporter commented: “Miss Cashman is a lithe, active-looking woman with jet black hair, and possesses all the vivacity and enthusiasm of a young girl. Her personality is very striking.” It was a pleasing tribute. Nellie was 53 now and had put on weight, but her sense of adventure had not dimmed with the years.

Victoria was buzzing with rumours of the looming war between the United States and Spain. The cause was the independence of Cuba and Puerto Rico, Spain’s last colonies in the New World, and the promotion of American interests in those islands. Nellie thought of Ireland and saw a David and Goliath struggle against oppression and wrongful possession. She decided to continue north, but, should war be declared, she was ready to return to Nevada to organize a company of women to join the fight.

She declared: “I do not value all the gold in Klondike as much as I would a chance to fight those treacherous Spaniards.” It sounded like wild talk, but it was sincere. Twenty years later she actually did organize a company of young men and set off at their head prepared to fight in the First World War.

Nellie expected to take on the Klondike in the company of her nephew, Tom, and another young man. They were the right age and ready for adventure. Tom had saved some money and told her he wanted to go. They were to have met in San Francisco, but Tom was not there, nor waiting in Victoria. She believed he might have gone ahead to Wrangell, and she wanted to leave the final decision on the route they would take to the goldfields until they met up.

In Victoria, she had the odd experience of encountering an imposter. She had sent \$10 and a letter to a merchant she knew in Seattle, asking him to keep a lookout for Tom Cunningham. A young man of the same name appeared in Victoria, representing himself as her nephew. It was some while since Nellie had seen the real Tom, but she was not fooled for long. With characteristic generosity, she allowed the fake nephew to keep the dollar he had left over from her gift; it would keep him going in meals for a few days. Nellie could have had him arrested.

A happier meeting in Victoria was with the chief justice of the province, the Honourable Theodore Davie. Nellie had first met him after the Cassiar rescue, and he was pleased to see her again. Writing to her after their meeting Davie said: “I have no doubt that the unflinching courage and determination which have been yours in the past years, will likewise guide you to success and fortune in the perilous trip to the Yukon, which, in mid-winter you are about to take.”

Nellie had an advantage over many of the stampeders crowding the wharves: she knew what conditions would be like in the north. Two years before, she had travelled to Alaska with companions investigating placer prospects, but they were poorly provisioned and had to turn back as winter set in.

She had made the memorable rescue journey in the Cassiar in bitter winter weather, and there she had learned to use snowshoes. She had lived in mining camps for most of the past 26 years, and experience had honed in her a sound instinct for promising ore beds.

Last but not least, despite trying to raise funds from backers, Nellie still had money. She would be able to buy claims and, if necessary, hire men to work them for her. And if fortune eluded her in the goldfields, she could fall back on her experience managing restaurants. How well Nellie knew that tired prospectors did not want to cook for themselves at the end of the day.

*Excerpted from Gold Rush Queen: The Extraordinary Life of Nellie Cashman,
TouchWood Editions ©2016 Thora Kerr Illing*

© Copyright Times Colonist