

1863 WILD HORSE CREEK GOLD DISCOVERY

by Arthur Raymond (Bud) Ryckman

Some reports suggest that a couple of American soldiers were the first to find gold on the Canadian side of the border in the Kootenay district. In any event, in 1863 a party of prospectors headed by Joseph Finlay set up camp near the confluence of the Kootenay and Saint Mary's Rivers. Their camp was located where an unnamed stream flowed into the east side of the Kootenay River. A test pan was washed revealing a substantial amount of placer gold in the unnamed creek. Subsequent tests with their panning continued to produce large flakes of gold. The unnamed creek was proving to be very rich in placer gold. One of the men noticed the presence of a wild horse stallion in the area so they named the creek "Stud Horse Creek." It was late in the season; they were running out of supplies so they pulled up stakes and headed south to winter at Walla Walla, Washington. Word soon got out about this gold discovery.

The following spring, American gold prospector parties headed by Robert Dore and John Fisher arrived at Stud Horse Creek, staked their claims and commenced panning in the rich gravels. A gold rush ensued with all of the hopeful miners, merchants and others looking for the anticipated Utopia that followed the discovery of gold in a wilderness area. By mid-summer of 1864 there were more than five thousand men with gold pans and rockers working the gravel bars of Stud Horse Creek and its tributaries. The first settlement was named Fisherville after the early prospector Jack Fisher. Later, one of the highest mountain peaks in the Canadian Rocky Mountains located in the area was named Fisher Peak in his honour. The majority of the men arrived by foot or horseback on the west side of the Kootenay River. The Kootenay is a large river that is very dangerous and difficult to ford. An enterprising gentleman named John Galbraith built a cable ferry and charged a fee of one dollar per man and five dollars per horse to ride across the Kootenay River on his ferry. Galbraith built the first home, a log cabin, on the plateau located above the Kootenay River and the community was given the name of Galbraith's Landing. John Galbraith then acquired title too much of the crown land in the

OPPOSITE

EDGAR DEWDNEY (1835-1916)

The Civil Engineer namegiver of the Dewdney Trail, built the first section from Hope to Rock Creek in 1861. He afterwards took the contract to build the section from Wild Horse to Rock Creek in 1864. Dewdney went on to become the Lieutenant Governor of the North-West Territories before becoming the fifth Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia.

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AROUND 1865 PHOTOGRAPH BY WILLIAM NOTMAN



area and became the largest landowner in the community. His brother Robert was afterwards joined him.

The original settlement of Fisherville was made up of miners who had rushed to the area with very little in the way of supplies and for the most part nothing more than tents for accommodation. The nearest source of supplies was Walla Walla, Washington. There were no roads, trails or any kind of connection to the business and government area of British Columbia that was located in the coastal communities of New Westminster and Victoria. In August of 1864, the government of the Crown Colony of British Columbia sent two men to look into the mining development in the Kootenays, determine how substantial the operation was and what part the government should take in providing access from the lower mainland to the new gold mining area. Upon their return, they advised that the merchants located in Victoria and New Westminster wanted to develop trade and supply the mining community that was developing. There would have to be an extension of the existing Dewdney Trail from Vermilion Forks (now Princeton) to Wild Horse Creek—the name of the creek had been changed as the government of the day thought the name of Stud Horse Creek was not acceptable. Edgar Dewdney headed the construction of the extended Dewdney Trail that was completed and provided access for travel from Hope to Wild Horse Creek in 1865. By the end of 1865 most of the Wild Horse Creek ground was under claim so the excitement of the rush was over, the easily obtained surface gold had been taken and the gold while still plentiful required more expensive

and technical mining equipment so many of the original miners moved to wherever the next discovery was rumored to exist. Word circulated that placer gold had been discovered on the Big Bend of the Columbia River so many miners packed up and headed for the Columbia. Hydraulic mining procedures were employed to win the deeper deposits. The banks of the Wild Horse were soon laced with flumes and giant hoses to wash the gravel under pressure and expose the gold.

The completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1885 brought new entrepreneurs into the region via Golden and then stage coach to Galbraith's Ferry. Some came as prospectors, some as ranchers and some as merchants. Colonel James Baker, who had retired from the British Army, purchased acreage from John Galbraith in an area known as Joseph's Prairie. Joseph's Prairie was the traditional land of the Kootenay Indians and was named after Kootenay Chief Isadore's father Chief Joseph. Chief Isadore was not pleased when Colonel Baker demanded that members of his band get off the Kootenay First Nations lands. Several other disputes developed between the band members and new landholders who were building fences around ground that had previously been the traditional territory of the Kootenays. A more serious matter of irritation between Chief Isadore and the newcomers to his territory occurred when two white miners named Hilton and Kempt were found murdered on the road to Golden in 1884. The area became known as Dead Mans Creek. Two years later two members of the Saint Mary's Band named Kapla and Little Isadore were arrested by the town constable and held in the town

jail on suspicion of having committed the murders. Chief Isadore was outraged with the fact that two of his band members had been arrested and charged with an offence that had occurred two years earlier. He demanded the release of the prisoners and stated that he, the Chief of the Saint Mary's Band of the Kootenays, was the only person qualified to pass judgment on members of his band. When the request was ignored, Chief Isadore, along with several of his warriors arrived at the wooden structured jail on horseback, held the town constable at bay, broke the jail open and took their imprisoned members with them. As the white community of Galbraith's Landing was severely outnumbered by the Kootenays, they sent word to the nearest North West Mounted Police detachment for help. The detachment was located in Fort MacLeod, North West Territories (Alberta had not yet been established) under the command of Colonel Samuel B. Steele.

Steele had been born in Purbrook, near Orillia, Ontario in 1848. He received his earliest education at the family farm before attending Royal Military College in Kingston. At the age of 18, Steele joined the Canadian Military hoping to participate in the Fenian Raids against Irish-Americans wanting to inflict pressure on Britain to withdraw soldiers from their homeland. Steele also went west in 1870 to participate in the Red River Rebellion of Louis Riel but arrived after the Métis had surrendered. The following year he joined Canada's first regular army unit hoping to see action. Instead, he was returned to Kingston as an instructor at the artillery academy.

In 1873 Steele was the third officer sworn

into the newly formed North West Mounted Police and was one of the officers to lead the raw recruits on the 1874 March West to Fort Whoop-Up [now Lethbridge, Alberta] to deal with American whiskey traders coming up into Canada and selling their concoction of bug-juice, called 'firewater', to the First Nations braves. Partners John Jerome Healy and Alfred B. Hamilton had originally named their whiskey-trading post Fort Hamilton but the nature of their business resulted in the name change. The Mounties were being sent west at the request of Prime Minister Sir John A. MacDonald to deal with Americans who had crossed the border into Canada and murdered 'Canadian' First Nations braves. Upon learning that a Canadian police force was being sent to Fort Whoop-Up the Americans merely got rid of the booze. Steele had been posted to Fort Whoop Up from Fort MacLeod with a crew of 75 officers and men of the "D" Division. The "D" Division had originated in Battleford, Saskatchewan. Steele returned to Fort Garry [present day Winnipeg] as a Staff-Sergeant Major and as an accomplished horseman went about training new recruits. It was during this period that Steele was initiated as a Freemason in Selkirk, Manitoba. In 1877 Steele met with Chief Sitting Bull, the Lakota Sioux holy man who led his warriors in a major victory against Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer at the Little Big Horn. Chief Sitting Bull then crossed the border into Saskatchewan with his followers in an attempt to escape the United States cavalry—and vengeance. Steele attempted unsuccessfully to persuade Sitting Bull to return to the United States.

Steele's division was selected to resolve the



Rock Creek yielded the very first gold in the Kootenay District that brought prospectors into British Columbia.

dispute with Chief Isadore at Galbraith's Landing. His orders were to assemble the "D" Division at Lethbridge and await further orders. They departed Lethbridge in late June of 1887 and arrived at Galbraith's Ferry on 31 July 1887. Steele immediately sent word to Chief Isadore that Kapla and Little Isadore would have to face a trial according to the laws of the land with the assurance that he, Steele would guarantee that the accused would be given every consideration and a fair and just trial. The battle of the Little Big Horn—Custer's Last Stand—had recently occurred in nearby Montana. On 25 June 1876 the 7th Cavalry Regiment of the United States Army commanded by General Custer was in the process of attacking the First Nations population located on the plains of Montana. Their goal was to wipe out the Plains First Nations population so cattle ranchers could occupy the land. The Lacota and Cheyenne tribes, who were

well known to members of the Kootenays, were the principal targets of the cavalry whose battle cry was "the only good Indian is a dead Indian." Under the command of Chief Sitting Bull the Indians fought back and annihilated the 7th Cavalry killing General Custer in the process. Having knowledge of this battle, and being aware of the U.S. Cavalry plans to wipe out all of the existing Plains Indians, Isadore was very reluctant to accept Steele's invitation and fully expected an attack on his people from the Canadian North West Mounted Police. Isadore's knowledge of the U.S. Cavalry combined with the fact that he had never seen a formation of Mounted Police with their bright red coats, rifles and side arms, led him to believe that they were soon going to be under attack. He waited for the expected raid but to his surprise, none came. In the meantime as a show of strength, patience and British diplomacy, the members of the "D" Division

commenced building an apparent fort along the edge of the plateau where the community of Galbraith's Ferry was located. It wasn't really a fort but a tall fence that looked like a massive fort from the Kootenay flats where Isadore resided along with the very large Saint Mary's band of Kootenay First Nations. The Kootenay Flats were part of the St. Eugene Mission located on the west side of the Kootenay River and the south side of the Saint Mary's River about 100 feet below the level of the plateau where the village, and now, the apparent huge fort was being constructed. As no attack came and Steele continued to convey a message of peaceful co-operation, Isadore became convinced that Steele was sincere so he agreed to surrender Kapla and Little Isadore to face "British Justice." On 20 August 1887 the accused were turned over to Steele. On 5 September, Steele dismissed the charges for insufficient evidence and from that point on Isadore regarded Steele as one of the very best and most honest men that he had ever encountered and that Steele was a man of his word and without doubt had administered a fair and just trial. Over the period of the next year, Steele and Isadore became close friends. Steele in his memoirs stated that Isadore was the strongest and most competent chief and leader that he had ever met in the many First Nations Bands and Tribes that he had encountered. By working with both sides, Steele also managed to resolve the land disputes that occurred between the Kootenays and the new settlers. The most serious dispute was between Colonel James Baker and Isadore over the title and ownership of the land area known as Joseph's Prairie. Steele worked closely with Isadore and Baker to bring about a harmonious relationship with the two men. He spent considerable time and effort detailing the regulations of the government of British Columbia pertaining to local law and land ownership, the Federal

Government of Canada regarding Federal Law, the Indian Act and the Department of Indian Affairs. He also explained in detail the position and function of the Indian Agent, the St. Eugene Reservation, and the Roman Catholic Oblate Missionaries who had erected a church and were preparing to build a hospital on the grounds of the St. Eugene Mission.

On 7 August 1888, their mission accomplished, Colonel Steele and his detachment departed Galbraith's Landing for the trip by horseback through the Crow's Nest Pass to their home post of Fort MacLeod. Their mission had kept them in the village of Galbraith's Landing for more than a year. Their accomplishments were monumental and peaceful in every way. Unlike the neighbouring Americans who arrived with the plan and intention of driving the First Nations off of the land so that they could develop it for cattle ranching, the Canadians came as traders and participants in the development of the community. Steele made a point of explaining how the Americans came as conquerors and the Canadians came as traders—principally as fur traders from the Hudson Bay Company with the factor often taking an Indian wife and remaining in the community trading and raising a family. The members of "D" Division of the North West Mounted Police, known as the "Red Coats" were accepted and recognized as friends and protectors by both the white and First Nations population of the community.

After the Mounties departed, the residents of the village of Galbraith's Landing were so impressed with the work that Steele had accomplished that they decided to rename their village and call it "Fort Steele,"—despite the fact that there was never a real fort at the location but a very effective look alike fort with the massive log fence built along the edge of the townsite.

ROCK CREEK YIELDED THE VERY FIRST GOLD IN THE KOOTENAY DISTRICT THAT BROUGHT PROSPECTORS INTO BRITISH COLUMBIA.



Chief Sitting Bull, who had led the Lacota and Cheyenne warriors in the devastating defeat of General Custer and the American Army 7th Cavalry Regiment in the Battle of the Little Big Horn, had fled to Canada with 1,200 of his men for the protection that he knew they would receive from the Canadian North West Mounted Police. Steele was instrumental in providing accommodation and provisions for Sitting Bull and his men at a reserve in Wood Mountain, Saskatchewan. Sitting Bull remained in Canada at Wood Mountain until 1881 when he returned to the U.S.A. to spend some of his time on a tour with the Wild West Show of Buffalo Bill Cody. He died from a gunshot wound inflicted by a policeman after he was arrested for participating in the “Ghost Dance” in 1890 at the Standing Rock Reservation.

In the course of his duties at Fort MacLeod, Sam Steele met a very sophisticated lady named Marie Elizabeth Harwood. Miss Harwood was at Fort MacLeod visiting her aunt Min, the wife of Superintendent Alex MacDonnell, commander of “H” Division at the fort. Sam Steele was now in General Command of the MacLeod Detachment and thereby was Alex MacDonnell’s superior officer as well as one of his very best friends. Marie’s father was a member of the Canadian Parliament. From their first meeting they appeared to have much in common. They were both expert equestrians and would ride off together at every opportunity. They both enjoyed music and singing and sports that were actively played at the fort. Samuel Steele was very good at story telling and Marie was a good listener. The most significant activity that they both loved and were very good at was dancing. They never missed a party where there was dancing and they were inevitably the first couple on the floor and the last to leave. Probably the dancing did more to enhance their relationship into a solid love affair than anything else. Steele proposed and Marie was delighted to accept. There was, however a problem. She was a Roman Catholic and he was an Anglican and a Freemason. His friends and fellow officers said he would be making a huge mistake to go ahead with the marriage. Sam Steele was satisfied that their love was genuine and deep and would not fail because of any religious difference. They

agreed that any children would be raised as Roman Catholics and there ended the matter. They were married on 15 January 1890 in Marie’s hometown of Vaudreuil, Quebec. For their honeymoon they traveled by train to New York City and then returned to Fort MacLeod. They settled into the life of a married couple resident in a rapidly developing community. Steele kept busy discharging his duties and responsibilities at the fort and as a couple they were actively involved in the social life. Their marriage produced 3 children: Flora, born in 1891, died in 1948, Gertrude, born in 1895, died in 1963 and Harwood, born in 1897, died in 1978. Steele’s accomplishments as a policeman became legendary as he rose up through the ranks.

It is interesting to look back on the history of the town of Fort Steele. In the 1890s the population of the town was growing very rapidly. Fort Steele was the boomtown of the East Kootenays. The economic and development outlook was very promising. A substantial base metal mine was in the development stage—the Sullivan Mine—at nearby Kimberly that eventually became the largest base metal mine in the world. The Wild Horse Creek, Cherry Creek, Perry Creek and others were continuing to produce placer gold. There was little doubt that modern geology and engineering would find the mother lode – source of all the placer gold that had been found in the Wild Horse since 1863. Many of the best geologists and mining engineers in the industry searched for the elusive mother lode without success. My cousin William Patmore who had a Doctorate in Geology from Princeton University and a personal friend of Albert Eisenstein spent a small fortune searching for the mother lode without success. Bill was convinced that a property that he was heavily involved called the Estella Mine located at the 6000-foot level in the Rocky Mountains above Fort Steele would prove to hold the mother lode of all of that placer gold that was found in the Wild Horse. Some ore containing commercial quantities of lead and zinc with traces of gold were obtained so a mill was constructed and exploration went ahead at full speed. The gold that they were seeking wasn’t found; the quantities of lead and zinc were insufficient to continue operation of the

mill so the Estella Mine was abandoned.

William Astor Drayton, a multi-millionaire member of the John Jacob Astor family of New York came to Fort Steele in the 1920s to manage an investment that he had made. He acquired a substantial amount of property and built a beautiful mansion that he furnished with elegant, expensive tapestries, deluxe furniture and artwork. He had log cabins constructed on the property for his servants and hired help. A dairy barn and livery stable were also constructed for the livestock. On occasion, highly bred horses and cattle could be seen grazing on the fenced in pastures. William Drayton believed that the mother lode would be located with the use of the

latest and most sophisticated mining machinery and equipment. He supplied the equipment and employed the services of some of the very best geologists and mining engineers available to complete the quest. Despite all of the expense and effort, the elusive mother lode was not located. The economic depression of the 1930s and finally the outbreak of World War in 1939 ended William Astor Drayton’s search for the principle source of the massive amounts of placer gold found in the Wild Horse Creek since 1863. Drayton sold the mansion, packed up the valuable artwork and tapestries and moved back to New York.



A MONITOR OR “GIANT”

This machine with a nozzle was used in “Hydraulic mining” or for directing and controlling a jet of water on Wild Horse Creek. The jet, under high pressure, excavated and washed away unwanted overburden of unwanted material. An adequate supply of gravity-fed water, ample dump space for tailings and a suitable bedrock grade were required for efficient hydraulic mining. The gold was recovered partly by cleaning the bedrock after the gravel had been stripped away but chiefly by trapping it with the riffles in the sluice box through which the gravel and water flowed to the tailings dump. This monitor was used at Wild Horse Creek.