

KLONDIKE KATE

The woman who was eventually dubbed the 'Queen of the Klondike', 'Flame of the Yukon', 'Belle of the North' and 'Klondike Kate' in Dawson City, Yukon, was born Kathleen Eloisa Rockwell in Junction City, Oregon, in 1876 but had grown up in Spokane, Washington. Her stepfather had stature in the community and the family lived in a large mansion until economic failures caused tensions in the home. Kate grew up as a bit of a tomboy and often played with boys rather than members of her own sex. Of a rebellious nature, her parents sent her to boarding schools and convents but the young woman either ran away or was expelled. In the 1890s, after her mother had divorced her husband, mother and daughter moved to New York where Kate had an unsuccessful attempt as an entertainer.

Kate joined a travelling song and dance theatre that went to the Yukon in 1900. First working as a tap dancer in Skagway and later Whitehorse, Rockwell found her stride in Dawson City as a member of the Savoy Theatrical Company. Kate subtracted five years from her age and as a 'teenage performer was much loved by the miners. What made Kate stand out from the other dancers was her flame dance. She would come out onto the stage wearing an elaborate dress covered in red sequins and an enormous cape. She would remove the cape and reveal a cane to which was attached several yards of red chiffon. She'd then leap and twirl with the chiffon until she resembled a great ball of fire. Although far from the best singer or dancer in Dawson City, Kate was a tireless and shameless self-promoter. On Christmas Eve, 1900, miners gave Kate a tin can for a crown with the edges cut into sharp points upon which were affixed lighted candles. The patrons of the saloon dubbed her the 'Queen of the Klondike' at that all night party and she clung to the name for the rest of her life. It was reported that Kate made \$200 a week for her flame dance, but on the floor dances she often cleared \$500 a night as a percentage-girl on champagne sales. Frequently her legs were bruised from being hit with gold nuggets thrown by the miners. She had the plush Star's Room upstairs over the theater, trimmed in red and gold.

Kate had an intense love affair with Alexander 'Pericles' Pantages, a struggling waiter and bartender. Born on the Greek Island of Andros in 1867, Pantages' first job in Dawson City had been peddling coal oil from a hand drawn sleigh. It wasn't long before

OPPOSITE

KATHLEEN ELOISA ROCKWELL (1876 - 1957)

Originally known as the 'Queen of the Yukon', 'Flame of the Yukon' and the 'Belle of the North', this dancer and promoter later changed her stage name to 'Klondike Kate'.

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'Klondike Kate's rhinestone belt with the 26 1/2" length, was gifted to George Murdock, the owner of Murdock's on Kate's last visit to the Yukon in the late 1940s or early 1950s.

MURDOCK'S GIFTS GOLD JEWELLERY, WHITEHORSE



the handsome Greek and Kate shackled up and soon afterwards Alex persuaded mistress Kate to join forces with him and open a saloon and brothel in Dawson City and their venture was a huge success until the Mounties busted Kate for operating a bawdy house and she was sentenced to one month of hard labour. It was while Kate was cooling her heels in goal that she decided to take out revenge on Katherine Maud Ryan, the first female special constable with the North West Mounted Police. In 1897 Kate Ryan, a nurse and caregiver from Johnville, New Brunswick, had moved to the Yukon and gained employment with the police as a woman guard. She came to be known as the original 'Klondike Kate'. This imposing woman, almost 6-feet tall, had returned home in 1901 and was amazed by the stories about her work in the Yukon. She had been dubbed the 'Klondike Kate' of the Yukon and everything said or written about her was positive. Kate Rockwell, upon being released from goal, again partnered up with Pantages to open up the Orpheum Theatre in Dawson City and began advertising herself as the 'real' Klondike Kate and in so doing completely and irrevocably ruined the reputation of the special police constable.

According to Ella Lung Martinsen in her book 'Trail to North Star Gold as told by her mother Velma D. Lung' the Savoy was originally owned by Abram Hensen 'Arizona Charlie' Meadows and known as the Grand Palace." It was in the Grand Palace that Klondike Kate soon became so famous. Arizona Charlie had just built this new plush theater and it was here that Klondike Kate did the exciting "cake-walk", wearing a crown of lighted candles; and here she performed the breath taking "flame act" while she danced with spectacular fury to fast-moving music, swirling hundreds of yards of filmy gauze up and down and across the stage, illuminated under very fiery, flame-coloured spotlights (coal oil carbon). And it was in this same theatre that she reached the peak of her brilliant career and became known as the "Queen of the Klondike". Ella's father Ed recalled a time when he and his partner were waiting for a stage to take them to Hunker Creek when they had a chance encounter with Kate and Cad Wilson, another

actress. The two men could hear the girls singing from a distance and decided to join in with the singing with ridiculous high falsetto tones and feminine soprano voices. Moments later the stage rounded the corner and the two women, dressed in long silk dresses of pink and blue and carrying in their laps large bouquets of wild flowers—blue bells, wild roses and delphinium—came into view. Within minutes the foursome were singing with real gusto many of the many popular numbers including the famous Rigoletto quartet. Kate then asked the two men if they had ever seen them performing at the Opera House.

Before leaving the goldfields the industrious Kate and Alex, by using her savings, bought the Orpheum Theatre with Kate billing herself as the star attraction. The Orpheum's daily receipts were initially \$8,000 a day but they then dropped to where they were barely able to cover expenses. The couple closed shop and headed south and brought back clean stage entertainment. The project didn't work so they sold out cheap and headed for the 'Outside' with, according to Kate, \$150,000.

After Kate left the goldfields for the 'Outside', she opened the first theatre in Victoria, called the Orpheum, and her moving picture machine was a silent movie called a biograph. The entertainment consisted of one act of vaudeville and one act of the biograph machine. Kate went on tours in the States and sent all her profits to Alex who was beginning to start up a theater chain across North America. After leaving the goldfields, Rockwell and Pantages extended their business relationship and Kate took another important step in her vaudeville career by opening theatres in Vancouver and Seattle. In September 1902 they returned to Seattle because Pantages wanted to expand the theatrical business. Kate told the papers that she made a trip to Texas and borrowed money to allow them to expand the business that ultimately lead to his riches.

It was about this time that Pantages managed to squeeze Rockwell out of the theatre business and it wasn't long before he owned or controlled 70 theatres up and down the Pacific Coast. He would eventually control 500

throughout North America. In 1905 Kate launched a lawsuit against Pantages for \$25,000 accusing him of reneging on a promise to marry her once they left the goldfields. Among the many articles that her earnings provided to Pantages were .75-cent cigars, \$15 silk shirts and board at \$40 a week. Kate told the court that in 1901 her promised husband became tired of the monotony of the Yukon mining city life and that she paid all his expenses to travel to San Francisco. From here the couple continued onto New York with her still paying all the expenses. While in the east she declared that Pantages introduced her everywhere as his wife both to his friends and to his relatives. Her lawsuit won her \$5,000 but by this time Pantages had married eighteen year-old Lois Mendenhall, a classy violin player.

Kate returned to the north and played in a few vaudeville troupes but her magic was gone. She danced in some of the saloons but her weight gain no longer turned the eyes of the patrons in her direction. She bought a hotel in Fairbanks, Alaska, a new town that had come into existence due to a gold strike by Swiftwater Bill Gates but this building burned down and she lost everything. Once, in dire straits, she went to see her former lover at his Seattle mansion and beg him for money. He gave her \$6 and sent her on her way adding insult to injury by promising to send her a spitence every month to stay away from him.

Pantages' romantic scandals were the thing of legend. He was arrested in 1929 for allegedly raping a 17-year-old-woman named Eunice Pringle. It was during this time that his wife Lois, dead drunk, ran over two people with her car and killed them both. She was charged with impaired driving causing death. His wife was found guilty and had to pay \$78,500 in damages for her accident. The prosecution lawyers against Alex called in Kate as a witness against her former lover. Found guilty in a jury trial, he was led away to begin a fifty year sentence. Pantages' legal battle exhausted a large part of his personal wealth and he sold out his theatre chain to Radio-Keith-Orpheum Pictures for \$24,000,000. The Pantages theatre chain, now under the umbrella



**PERICLES (ALEXANDER) PANTAGES AROUND 1910
(1867 - 1936)**

The Greek bartender that first loved and then jilted Klondike Kate went to the 'Outside' and opened a theater that he named the Crystal in Seattle. He afterwards opened a string of 500 theaters across North America thus becoming the famous 'Theater King'. Pantages eventually sold out his theater chain to Radio-Keith-Orpheum for \$24,000,000 with the new owner being Joseph P. Kennedy, the father of President John F. Kennedy.

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BY J. WILLIS SAYRE



Klondike Kate's metal mesh evening bag.

MACBRIDE MUSEUM, WHITEHORSE

of RKO, switched ownership to Joseph P. Kennedy and the father of President John F. Kennedy. On the day the stock market crashed, triggering the Great Depression, Pantages was convicted and sentenced to 50 years in prison. He appealed and remained free on bail. The stress of his legal battles probably contributed to the heart failure that claimed his life in 1936. It was then that rumours began to circulate that he had been framed by a group of former sourdoughs as revenge for the ruin he had brought to the 'Queen of the Klondike'.

In 1910, at age 37, Kate married for the first time to Floyd Warner, a cowboy, of Bend, Oregon, but that marriage failed. In 1933, Rockwell married John Matson, a miner from her Klondike days. She was 57 and he was 69. The marriage took place in Vancouver. It was a strange marriage with her living in Bend, Oregon, and him in the Yukon. They communicated by him writing love letters to her and her writing poems to him. He opened a bank account in her name before returning back to the Yukon to his gold claim and trapline. She came up to see him several times and during these visits they stayed in separate hotels in Dawson City. She would walk by the Orpheum Theater that was boarded up and run down—with nothing but silence within its leaning walls. Cruel oldtimers of Dawson City shook their heads and muttered "There's that bitch again, back for more of Matson's gold". The

marriage lasted until his death in 1946 at the age of 82. She received a short last letter from the Silent Swede that simply read: "My dearest wife, I am so tired after this trip." By a strange twist Joseph Sestak, a concerned trapper and miner, went to look for Matson and found his bones scattered by animals over a huge area. He informed the Mounties and in guiding them to Matson's cabin Sestak fell and gouged out an eye. He hired a young Yukon lawyer named Erik H. Nielsen and was eventually awarded over \$3,000. Nielsen went on to become the Progressive Conservative Member of Parliament for the Yukon and Deputy Prime Minister in the Brian Mulroney government. He also served as Minister of Defense.

After moving to Bend, Oregon, Kate opened a restaurant on one of the main streets and was known affectionately by the locals as 'Aunt Kate'. She often shared her money with the needy and volunteered her time to take care of the sick who were affected by the flu epidemic. Still the tireless self-promoter, she was always ready to chat with anyone who would listen and give away portraits of herself from when she was a dancer in Dawson City. These portraits were always signed 'Klondike Kate' or 'Kate Rockwell'.

In 1942 Kate went to Hollywood to discuss the making of a movie on the Yukon Gold Rush that resulted in the movie 'Klondike Kate' coming out a year later starring Ann Savage.

Kate, at the age of 71, married for a third time to William L. Van Duren. In May 1948 Mr. and Mrs. Van Duren visited Vancouver on an extended honeymoon where Kate agreed to an interview with Major James Skitt Matthews, the city archivist.

Kate Ryan, the original 'Klondike Kate' was born in 1869 and never married. She died in Vancouver in 1932.

'Klondike Kate' died in 1957 at Sweet Home, Oregon, at the age of 80 and as per her wishes her ashes were scattered over the high desert of Oregon.

MY WILL

By 'Kondike Kate' Rockwell

All that I can leave you
Are memories of the past.
The dreams we dreamed together
That were too sweet to last.

To the tired and weary hearted,
Burdened down with all life's ills,
I leave the sunrise on the desert
And the twilight on the hills.

To the lonely and the old folks,
Many walks down Memory's lane,
Hand in hand like childhood sweethearts
Many we wander once again.

To the boys and girls who told me
When their foolish feet had strayed,
I can leave you at least the knowledge
They never were betrayed.

To the ones who bandied gossip,
Tore my heart with heavy-edged words,
I leave my full forgiveness
To combat bitter words.

To the friends who were so faithful
Through my laughter and my tears,
I leave peace and contentedness,
For their declining years.



KATHLEEN ELOISA ROCKWELL (1876 - 1957)

Nicknamed the 'Darling of Dawson', Kathleen was thrice married. On leaving the Yukon for the 'Outside', she lived most of the rest of her life in and around Bend, Oregon. Upon her death in 1957, she specified that her ashes be scattered across the high desert. In the portrait above, she displays a necklace of nuggets from her days in Dawson City during the Yukon Gold Rush.

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