

WHITEHORSE

I've often thought that Whitehorse is such a proud name for the Yukon's capital city. The name has a ring about it and tells a story too. A story about the nearby Whitehorse rapids whose waters once churned and rolled – leaving little doubt about the power and majesty of the Yukon River. To Klondikers, the foaming waters looked like the mains of white horses racing to the gold fields.

But Whitehorse was very close to being called something else. Close is the operative word. For a time, the original settlement here was called Closeleigh, a name chosen by officials with the White Pass Railway. The railway owed its existence to the Close Brothers, a group of British financiers who had bankrolled the construction of the railway. So who were they?

In 1878 Close Brothers Investors, led by W.B. Close, was formed in England. The company bought cheap farm land in Iowa that they sold to settlers for a handsome profit. Then the company recruited young Englishmen from University and sent them to become farmers in Iowa. The company was always on the lookout for investments. In 1885, Close Brothers began a long and profitable association with the First National Bank of Chicago.

Then, in 1897, against the advice of his advisors, senior partner, W. B. Close decided to invest in construction of the White Pass railway. He paid ten thousand pounds to acquire the right of way to build the railway from Skagway to Whitehorse, not knowing if the railway could be built through this imposing wilderness. Fate played a remarkable hand in the spring of 1898, when the Close Brothers railroad engineer Sir Thomas Tancrede happened to be in Skagway the same week that a Canadian railroad builder, Michael Heney, was looking over the same possibilities.

Heney, who had worked on railway construction throughout Canada, convinced the British engineer that they could build the railway. The White Pass and Yukon route was created. On May 27, 1898, the first men, horses and material were landed at Skagway and construction of the rail project – which would eventually cost seven million dollars – began.

In the two years it took to build, many thousands of men worked on the railway and thirty-five died on duty. However, the Close Brothers investment

firm did get their money back and more. Only determined opposition by a small group of Whitehorse residents in 1900, prevented the town at the end of the Close Brother's White Pass rail line from being called Closeleigh. The White Pass & Yukon Railway.

Early in 1897, William Brooks Close, a partner in Close Brothers & Co, a well respected financial house in London, was introduced to Charles Henry Wilkinson, who represented a syndicate by the name of the British Columbia Development Association Ltd.

The purpose of this meeting was for this syndicate to solicit financial support from Close Bros. Ltd., for their project, the building of the White Pass & Yukon Railway, after several unsuccessful approaches had already been made in the USA and Canada.

In his wisdom, and against the advice of his firm's solicitors, W.B, as he was affectionately known, decided, that with the solid connections and substantial interests his firm had in the USA, that they should go ahead and provide the financial backing for this project.

In the early spring of 1898 at St. James Hotel in Skagway, a young Irish Canadian surveyor by the name of Michael Heney, with great railroad construction experience, together with Sir Thomas Tankrede, an engineer representing Close Brothers of London, England, Samuel H. Graves, their USA representative and E.C. Hawkins, an American engineer, held a meeting that brought about the reality of the White Pass and Yukon Route.

On 27 May 1898 the first men, horses and material were landed at Skagway and by 21 July 1898, the first train was operated for a distance of four miles out of Skagway. It was the first passenger train ever operated in Alaska, so far north of anywhere on the American continent.

The railroad was a marvel of engineering. To be able to build through the White Pass's rocky precipices meant that men were suspended on ropes to stop them falling off the steep slopes while cutting the grade. Dynamite

had not yet come into use and immense quantities of black powder were used for blasting through the solid granite.

The building of the railroad continued mercilessly through the freezing winter. At one time there were 3,000 men shovelling snow to clear the way for the blasters to be able to get to the end, so that the tracklayers could get started. From sea level the summit reached 3,300 feet in 21 miles. A total of 35,000 men had worked on the railroad and 35 had lost their lives.

The railroad reached the summit of the White Pass on 18 February 1899, and the head of Lake Bennett on 6 July 1899. So began the White Pass and Yukon Railway. At this time W.B. Close had travelled from England, and upon his arrival at Skagway Camp No. 1, was made an honorary member of the Arctic Brotherhood.

The day of 31 July, 1900 was one that the people of Whitehorse can quite justifiably consider to be the day that their city was born. It was the arrival of the first passenger train from Skagway, which brought to fruition a dream made by W.B. Close in December of 1897. This project had proved to be the "golden nugget" for the finances of Close Brothers Ltd., for they had indeed struck gold, and the key to the heart of the Yukon Territories had been provided.

Such was the gratitude shown by the people of the city of Whitehorse to Close Brothers Limited, that they re-named their city Closeleigh, in gratitude to this historic birthright given to them by the opening of the gateway to the rest of the world.

The Chilkoot Pass trail and the White Pass are both mountain passes which the people walked along. Today the railroad and highway go through the White Pass, so very little hiking is done there. People do however come from around the world to hike the Chilkoot and it is a family event for many. My friend tells me that two of his daughters have hiked it, and one has hiked it three times. It is no picnic either, most people take two to five days as it is very steep, very rocky, and very

THE WHITEHORSE HORSE

Rearing at the top of Two Mile Hill, this mechanical stallion, comprised a body parts donated by many citizens of the Yukon's capital city,



scenic.

This last summer, RW Bro. Art Christenson, (a member of Whitehorse Lodge No. 46), and his wife Ione (I own), who was the Commissioner of the Yukon for many years, ran a small hotcake stop, at Lindeman Lake (near Bennett Lake), which is at the end of the 33 mile trail, and served over 2,000 hikers in three months, to raise funds for charity.

They served a sourdough pancake, (a traditional piece-de-resistance), from starter dough that came over the trail in 1898 with Art's father-in-law, who was in the North West Mounted Police, at that time.

And that Brethren is another story!