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DAWSON, Y. T.

THE LION OF THE NORTH

by Arthur Raymond (Bud) Ryckman

Superintendent Samuel Benfield Steele was the man in charge of the North West Mounted Police in Dawson City at the height of the Yukon Gold Rush.

This was the same Sam Steele who a few years earlier had investigated the murder of two miners at Wild Horse Creek [later Galbraith's Landing]. When Steele left Galbraith's Landing underwent a name change—it was renamed Fort Steele. The discovery of gold in the Yukon presented Steele with a new set of challenges. His task was to establish Canadian customs posts at the head of the White and Chilkoot Passes and at Lake Bennett. He earned a reputation for his rule that no one be allowed to enter the Yukon without a ton of provisions to support themselves during the winter months.

In 1898 the discovery of gold in the Canadian Yukon created a stampede of would be miners headed for what they thought and hoped would bring them instant riches. This sudden rush of people who came from all over the world but in particular from the San Francisco area of California presented serious problems for the government of Canada. The Commissioner of the North West Mounted Police posted Steele as the Canadian policeman in charge in the Yukon. Steele departed immediately by train to Vancouver where he was to be given his orders directly from Clifford Sifton, the Federal Minister of the Interior. He left his dear wife and three children with no idea as to how long he would be gone. At Vancouver he met with Superintendent Bowen Perry. The two officers then journeyed to Skagway, Alaska, a wild American community located at the base of the White Pass and Dyea, Alaska, a small community located 10 miles away at the base of the Chilkoot Pass. Steele and Perry were ordered to set up command posts at the top of the two passes, claim the territory beyond the posts as Canadian and advise all who wanted to proceed further that they would have to be prepared to obey Canadian laws. This was an arduous and almost impossible task but the two men backed by a force of less than 300 constables accomplished the task in excellent style. The miners entering Canada by way of the Chilkoot or White Pass were referred to as "Klondike Argonauts." Steele admired their grit and determination to reach their goal that was still many miles away at

MAJOR SAMUEL BENFIELD STEELE (1848 - 1919)

Often referred to as 'Steele of the Mounted', or 'Lion of the Yukon' Steele was an almost legendary Canadian figure, who, had he been American, would have ranked right up there with Davy Crockett or Daniel Bowie.

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Dawson City. The Argonauts respected the “Mountie” who laid down the law with no compromise. Many of the new arrivals never made it to the gold fields. Some perished en route, some simply gave up and headed back to civilization and some, including my mother’s uncle, (my great uncle), Arthur Nicol quickly realized that all of the gold bearing property had been staked so there was little or no chance of cashing in on the bonanza of gold but they could earn very good money by backpacking on the Chilcoot Trail. This became very lucrative when Steele made it a condition of entry into Canada that everyone wanting entry would have to have sufficient materials and supplies to sustain them until they reached their targeted goal of Dawson City. Qualification to enter Canada required a total of about 1,400 pounds of supplies that had to be transported to the top of the pass. Only when the goods were on hand at the summit, would passage be granted into Canada. Arthur Nicol was a strong young man who took advantage of these procedures and regulations. He prospered, as a backpacker on the Chilcoot Trail and in the process became a close personal friend of Sam Steele.

Steele set up headquarters for the mounted police at Bennett Lake but spent the majority of his time at the post situated at the summit of the Chilcoot Pass where he would meet the men wanting to enter the Yukon and detail the rules that had to be obeyed and followed by everyone entering Canada. After the initial rush settled down, Steele moved to Dawson City that was located at the confluence of the Yukon and Klondike Rivers. Steele and his men were kept busy administering the law, providing mail service, looking after sick and injured individuals, collecting fines and duties as well as doing everything possible to look after the well being of the thousands of people who were now resident in Dawson City. For the work that he had accomplished, Steele was promoted and given full command of the North West Mounted Police in the Yukon. He returned to Fort MacLeod and his wife and family after two years of service in the Yukon.

War had broken out in South Africa between the Boers and Queen Victoria’s Army. As part of the British Empire, Canada was obliged to participate. In January of 1900, Lord Strathcona (Donald Alexander Smith) asked Steele to create a light horse cavalry to be based on the style and operation of the mounted police. He asked Steele to recruit and train the men into a fighting regiment and then proceed to South Africa to enter the fray in support of Queen Victoria’s Army. Steele accepted. He traveled to Montreal to set up Canadian headquarters and training facilities for the Lord Strathcona Horse Cavalry. He sent telegrams to the Mounted Police posts and asked them to spread the word to all and any of the many Argonauts, Mounted Policemen and backpackers that he had befriended in the Yukon, as he was a recruiting volunteer for the regiment. The response was positive and 537 volunteers enlisted within 5 days to fill the manpower required for the planned regiment. My great uncle Arthur Nicol was one of the volunteers. He had remained in the Yukon working in Dawson City. When he received word from Sam Steele about the request for volunteers, he immediately headed out and joined with other volunteers bound for Montreal to become members of Samuel Steele’s “Lord Strathcona Horse Cavalry.” They were instructed to proceed by C.P.R. to Montreal for combat training. The men were assembled and billeted at Lansdowne Park in Ottawa by 15 February 1900. After training was completed, the regiment sailed on 17 March 1900 to South Africa on a special vessel that had been arranged for by Lord Strathcona with stalls for the horses together with space for feed and equipment. The trip was a difficult one with rough waters inflicting seasickness on many of the men plus some kind of illness that had attacked the horses. Many of the horses perished at sea. Eventually they arrived, entered the battle and made a very substantial contribution to the outcome of the war. When the hostilities ended, Steel had become a national hero. For his exceptional and heroic service, Steele was decorated by King Edward VII and was made a Commander of The Bath and a member of the Victorian Order. The

government of South Africa persuaded him to remain in South Africa to help organize the new South African Mounted Police force. Finally, Samuel Steele returned to his wife and family in Canada in 1907. No longer a member of the mounted police—he had retired in 1903 after 30 years of service—he was able to spend time with his family and commence writing his memoirs. He agreed to assume command of the “Lord Strathcona Horse Cavalry” that was now a permanent Canadian Regiment. Sam Steele also served as president of the Canadian Club and Commissioner of the Boy Scouts of Canada during the period from 1907 until 1914 when World War I broke out.

At the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Steele, retired Mounted Police Superintendent and retired South African Commander of the Lord Strathcona Horse Cavalry, volunteered to command the Canadian Expeditionary Force that was about to be sent to fight in France. His application was rejected because of his age. The Canadian public, who looked at Steele as a national hero and to be the best man in the country to handle the command were highly annoyed and brought considerable pressure on the government to re-consider. As a result, Steele was appointed Major General in command of the second Canadian Division with 25,000 troops. Because of his age he wasn’t allowed to take an active combat command in France, so, at the request of General Sir Robert Kitchener, Steele was appointed General Commander of the southwestern district in England including the Canadian training base at Shorncliffe. On 1 January 1918, Samuel Benfield Steele was appointed Knight Commander of the order of Saint Michael and Saint George. He gave up his command and officially retired from Military Duty in July 1918.

Samuel Benfield Steele—a Canadian hero, leader of men, Superintendent of the Mounted Police, Commander of the Lord Strathcona Horse Cavalry in South Africa and a man who had faced and survived some of the most dangerous and difficult events in the history of Canadian Police and Canadian Military,

died of influenza 30 January 1919 in Putney, England, where he was preparing and looking forward to returning to Canada and home. His body was sent to Winnipeg where Mounted Policemen, Members of the Lord Strathcona Horse Cavalry, soldiers from the 2nd Canadian Division and Members of Parliament, attended his funeral parade. Thousands of Winnipeg citizens lined the streets to pay their respect to a great Canadian as the funeral procession passed.

OPPOSITE

The miners of Dawson City were 90 percent Americans living under British rule. Here at the North West Mounted Police barracks, John 'Jack' Wallace Crawford, the legendary American buckskin poet, scout and showman, addresses a large assembly of mostly American gold miners during an American 4th of July celebration, 1899.

"Captain" Jack, as Crawford came to be known, earned his reputation as a scout for U.S. Brigadier General George Crook, America's most successful commander in the Indian Wars. One of the poet scout's most memorable accomplishments was his 350-mile ride on horseback in six days to get his own story published in the New York Herald of the great Sioux victory by the U.S. Army at Slim Buttes. Miners' cabins displaying gardens dot the hillsides behind the largest city west of Winnipeg and north of Seattle. The NWMP barrack clearly shows its fortlike structure.

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AUTUMN 4th JULY CELEBRATION - NWMP SQUARE DAWSON 1899