

# A SHORT AND DIRTY YUKON RIVER TALE

(By M. J. Brown)

## Boose-Hoisting Squaw Says She is Legal Wife of Rex Beach. How "Sour Doughs" Got Name.

"Short and Dirty" says she is the wife of Rex Beach the vigorous novelist who has made Alaska famous with his virile stories of the North Land.

"Short and Dirty" is a drunken Siwash squaw who hangs out around the river junction at Tananna, and I was told when I reached that town I could interview the dusky charmer and get "a real story," one the most of the writers pass up on account of the fame of the "The Spoilers" author.

I wouldn't pass up anything in Alaska, so I looked forward to the time when I could meet the Indian maiden and trade the price of a pig for a story.

But nothing doing. When I reached Tananna the maid wasn't being interviewed. She was in jail at Fairbanks for drunkenness and disorderly conduct, and wouldn't be back until she had served a 20-day sentence.

I served 12 days in the junction town, waiting for a boat that would let me on, and I have a yellow feeling for the squaw. She is "Short and Dirty."

But here's the dope as I got it. It is common talk that the squaw lived with Beach as his wife in Rampart for a long time. In fact I was assured by many that that is an established fact and is not denied by any of the old timers on the Yukon. However, there is some doubt as to whether or not she was his legal wife or whether the union was just an Alaskan "common law" affair.

All this occurred years ago before Beach broke into prominence. He lived in a cabin at Rampart and the Indian girl washed the dishes and darned his socks. It is said at this time the girl was handsome according to the Indian rules. She was short as ever then, but not as dirty. As the tale is told, after Beach got to putting his stories over, and the reviewers began to dig up his life, he shook the native girl, and she followed the white folks' rule of civilization by leading a personally conducted excursion to the dogs.

Now she poses for the river tourists (when she is out of jail) as the cast off wife of the noted author, and pan-handles them for the price of drinks.

I had not access to the marriage statistics, so simply state the stories current along the Yukon, and give you the "Short and Dirty" story as it was told to me.

What is a "sour dough," and what makes a man eligible? is a question often asked me.

Down to real tacks a "sour dough" is one who can make sour dough bread, but the term is usually applied to one who has seen the Yukon freeze up and thaw out twice. By that time it has been able to learn how to make and bake the bread, he is supposed to have been buried for several months. And these qualifications also apply to membership in the Alaska Brotherhood, an organization that at one time had a lot of social strength in Alaska, with lodge buildings in every river town, but which has now nearly run out.

But I have forgotten my bread. Sour dough bread is about the same as mother used to make before rich American blood called for yeast, holes and alum now known as bakings.

In the southwest mining camps about the only bread in circulation is a baking powder product like biscuit—just a flour, lard, salt and baking powder scrambled baked in a skillet and lid, and called pones. And down there boys and girls fill up on it daily with frijoles as a side dish, and grow fat and healthy.

But in Alaska baking powder doesn't go to any extent. The people won't eat it. They say it is harmful. When I make the south-west comparison to an old trapper, the explanation I got was "they do a lot of things on the Rio Grande that we can't do on the Yukon. Baking powder gets us here."

Sour dough bread is made from emptins, rising, sponge, or whatever you may call it, just old-fashioned Yankee bread. The great secret, the one accomplishment that promotes a "cheech-cker" to a "sour dough" is that of never losing his "rising," and not letting it get too sour. Back in the hills a yeast cake at times would command a dozen times its weight in pure gold dust, for you can't phone down to the grocery and have the auto deliver out a cake. Once a man loses his "rising" and he has lost his bread. So a bit of it is carried on from one baking to another, guarded more carefully than the belt of puggies. And that is the "sour dough" story.

A man buried three feet deep in Dawson soil twenty years ago may be exhumed to-day and he will be as "dike as in the old klondike days when the miners laid him there. 'Cause why? Because he is an original "stiff," he has been in cold storage for twenty years; frozen as solid as his dirt bed.

Once plant a man, below the thaw level, about two and a half feet, and a thousand years from now he can be dug up and he found in an excellent state of preservation.

It occurred to me this scheme had the ancient Egyptians, worse than I suggested to a miner that as it was but a matter of years when Dawson would return to the wild from whence it came, that permanent markers should be put over some of the hardest frozen stuffs, so that the explorers of a new civilization a thousand years hence would not have so much trouble in research and guessing. He replied that it would be of no avail, for the minute their frozen bodies were uncovered, the warm air they immediately went into the phosphate business.

At St. Michael a short time ago the body of a Russian priest was exhumed and I talked with "Old Tom," one of the men who dug him up. He had been buried on the shore of the North Sound and a boat company wanted the ground for dry dock purposes. The priest had been buried for more than 20 years, and when exhumed he was in just the same state as when buried—he had been frozen solid all these years.

But all dead bodies are not in this condition, in fact the most of them are not, for the reason that it is mighty hard work to dig a grave thru the solidly frozen ground, and as a fellow said, "What does it matter whether they 'keep' or not? That was the way I reasoned when I helped bury the trio of Eskimos. The man who helped to exhume the priest said that before the body had arrived at the new grave decomposition had made the face almost unrecognizable as a human face.

I tendered a \$10 gold piece for my breakfast in Dawson, on my way down the river, and the girl at the cash register asked me if I was going up or down. I shot she was getting chatty and flattered myself that she wanted to know if I was going to remain in town, so friend being several hundred miles away, I endeavored to look boyish, and told her I might buy a lot and build in Dawson. Her reply dashed my hopes for a flirtation. "I wanted to know which kind of change to give you," she said, and then she explained if I was going up the river she would give me \$9.25 in Canadian money, but if I was going down, in Alaska, she would give me American currency.

It is a peculiar but positive fact that the "sour doughs," the real, seasoned Alaskans who have been "inside" for six or eight years, are afraid to go out. There are hundreds of such men in Alaska, many of them sick and tired of the hard and comfortless North Land, and who yearn to return to the States, but when the time comes, they don't go; they put it off until another summer, and then put it off again.

They are simply afraid to go out and mix with the hustle and changes. They think they are like the boy off a farm who goes to New York for the first time. They realize they have been out of the world for several years and they think the minute they step onto the dock at Seattle every burgo-steerer in the city will know them by their awkward ways and pounce onto them! It's a sort of mental aberration, or

## Yukon Insanity

There are many varieties in Alaska, all the way from eccentrics to bugs. And so they think they will go out some day and they hope they can "come back" and fit in some where as they once did, but Robert Service, the Alaskan poet, who is now in the trenches in France, frames this for their benefit:

A cabin, a squaw, a fish wheel,  
A bend in the river's flow;  
A couple of sad-eyed half-breeds—  
He died there—a "sour dough."

It was pitiful to me, the children born in these river-girt towns and whose knowledge of the "outside" is what they hear from those who come in and who have time enough to talk with them. Their playthings and amusements are very few, and enjoyment is almost unknown.

One day I ran across a pretty little white girl playing on a rock above the town—a big flat stone on which she had her pitifully few little playthings, a little wagon with spool wheels, an Indian baby basket and a few tin spoons. She was "playing house."

I told her about the many toys and playthings my little girl had on the outside and her eyes grew big with wonder and desire. Then she told me a great secret, one her father and mother had told her to guard, but I promised not to tell.

Daddy says when he sells his goods we will all go outside, where summer is most all the time, and where chickens and lots of things grow, and he will get me a real white doll and a cart.

Her father had a little store, carried a moose stock and managed to live by trading with the Indians. His wife was a white woman.

Fishing? Every stream in Alaska is filled with fish, and the Yukon with salmon, but in my 2,200 mile trip down this river I never saw an angler.

Fish is meat, not sport, in Alaska. There are fish wheels all along the river and they are there to toss up enough of the salmon for winter meat. Many of the tributary streams are alive with smaller fish during the summer months, but they are climate-wise and go down before winter sets in and freezes the streams solid to the bottom.

Hunting? There is not a greater big game preserve on earth, but like the fish, game is only meat. To be sure some of the outside big game hunters came up around Mt. McKinley and make big killings, but the Alaskan and Indians hunt for food only.

There are times during the summer when great herds of caribou will cross from one divide to another, when a blind woman would kill them if she would but point the Winchester at the rumble and pull the trigger. The big fellows will go in bunches of thousands. Often they will ford the Yukon when a steamer is going up or down and it simply has to wait for the herd to get over. Passengers can kill them

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By Hamilton B. Williams

If ever, by any misfortune, you find a human being who twists his mouth at the Law of Love, and refuses to acknowledge its paramountcy you will be looking upon a soul that is committing blasphemy. He is telling God and man that the Law of Life is false.

The way to Life is the trail of the sunway, of whatsoever things are true, honest, of good report, lovely, a sunway framed with glory on which God's singers—Beauty, Good and Truth, sing—and they will go home with us and lodge if we keep open house.

In our rediscovery of the treasure of truth the cup of cold water becomes sacred by the kindness behind the giving, and a greeting sacred by the fact that when two meet together there is the Other Friend to bless; and the simple elemental courtesies become transformed into marvelous levers of lifting by the Other One's hand at the task.

The shop, the field, the home, the street are in the blaze of the presence of God—and the common task is also a part of the kingdom. Upon the highway of prayer a child's stammering cry goes up with the prayer of the Christ.

If Love trace the program one must be stalwart enough to follow thru fire and flood, be good

tho the world reels by soot, be true tho the east be refulgent, be honest tho the air grows cheat by refusing the gifts of the exalted part of game by refusing to play holding comfort, cheer and site, cheat by aping the instincts God planted in one—and the cheaters are who darkened hearts and homes beset sorrow and despair—leautiful because God is best, honored by the Infinite Life, his best reward which is His Life.

I do not dread  
What's set behind the curtain  
Near or far ahead—  
God's waiting at the door—  
With His befriending,  
Must come good ending.  
His grace be mine, I shall be  
Yea more than conqueror.

With highest goal,  
Where God shall be our crown  
I shall honor soul  
That keeps the house with  
And. Ho! the star road,  
Light-blazed, that's our road.  
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Where Life is—and to see!

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