

Tramped The Trail Of '98

By Christy McDevitt

THE Northern Lights, according to the poet of the Yukon, have seen great sights but even that phenomenon of Arctic nature had no adequate means of seeing with John Harper, the only man living today who ever boiled a can of water in a twenty-foot snowdrift.

At the moment, John is living on a farm near Mission City and has watched his 81st milestone glide by, but he farmed in Point Grey in the days when Vancouver was merely a gleam in the eye of a land speculator, and he climbed Chilkoot Pass when the mad fever of '98 swept across the continent.

Even today, as he dreams in the twilight of a busy life, John Harper is a powerful-bodied man and it is easy to understand how he withstood the numerous hardships which made life in the Yukon a living hell for those unfitted for the gruelling race.

But to return for the moment to the boiling water.

"We built a wee fire," the old sourdough recalls, "on the crest of a summit miles above timberline.

"The wood we used was borrowed, without their consent, from the RCMP detachment. It was bitter cold and despite the stinging wind and the drop-

ping mercury, the snow upon which we had laid the fire kept melting.

"As it melted the fire descended deeper and deeper into the drift until it was down a good twenty feet.

"I was looking after the water for our tea and as the can started disappearing, I hooked a length of wire to the handle and followed the flame to the bottom.

"It was housekeeping under difficulties, but, do you know, when I hauled up that little can of water it was bubbling and boiling just as if you had had it sizzle on your own kitchen stove."

The northern frontier in those days was a lawless land, John remembers, despite the efforts of the red-coated mounties.

The few police had such a large territory to patrol it was almost impossible for them to keep up with the rag and bob-tail element prominent in such communities.

But the police did track down one rascal and he was a blood-thirsty villain.

"He had a small shack back in the bush," John relates.

"It was about fifty yards from a fork in the road. At this fork the ruffian had erected a sign pointing toward his shack and the sign explained that this was the main trail to the outside.



JOHN HARPER

... pioneer in 1890

"Naturally, a lot of those walking out of the country saw the sign and they headed for the shack.

"When the spring thaw melted the snow, all these bones were found and

a hunt was instituted for the bushman who had lured them to his web."

John was born in Kilkenny, Ireland. He left home while still a boy and farmed for a while in various sections of Canada and the western States.

When he arrived in Vancouver, this city was a wilderness of bush and he logged and farmed in what is now the choice residential district of Point Grey.

Following the trail of '98 he returned to Ireland, planning to settle down in the land of his birth, but he found the country far too confining. He was accustomed now to large spaces and he couldn't suffer the little fields enclosed within gray stone walls.

He bought a farm, 160 acres in the Fraser Valley because that was the choice arable land of British Columbia. Some time ago he split this farm in two and now cultivates 80 acres.

"There are not many of the old timers living," he regrets.

His bosom pal of his early escapades, Dan Cooper, is somewhere on Vancouver Island but John can recite hundreds of names of men who helped carve Vancouver from the forest, but all of them are merely memories.

He visited the old hulk which was immortalized by Robert W. Service in "The Cremation of Sam McGee." This old barge was a tourist attraction for

many years because of the engine boiler in which the legendary Sam built a blazing fire and crawled in to escape the searching cold of the Yukon.

John has never read the poem, but he recalls the story being bruited about and he feels that maybe the saga had some foundation in fact.

Today he is happy and content on his farm and his visits to Vancouver are mighty few. Occasionally an old family friend, William A. Walker, provincial fire marshal, drives out to see the old man and once in a while he'll persuade John to take a trip to the city.

Vancouver has changed, the old man tells you in a masterpiece of understatement.

"Everybody seems in a hurry of a hurry to go nowhere. Too many big buildings and too much traffic.

"I like it out here. The air is clean and the country is quiet and peaceful."

John is living now with his memories and while he admits suffering terrific hardships during the gold rush to the Northland, he wouldn't have missed it for the world.

"If you were a man it brought out the good in you," he claims.

"If you were a weakling, it killed you."

And from all accounts, John Harper was a man.