

The 1898 Klondike Gold Rush & Martin County

The Klondike Gold Rush of the late 19th century became a frenzy of activity after gold was discovered along the Klondike River near Dawson City, located in the Yukon Territory of northwest Canada. This set off the “Klondike Stampede,” which by 1898 caused the population of the Klondike to approach 40,000 inhabitants and threatened to cause a famine.

Did you know that Martin County had a direct connection to the Klondike gold rush of 1898? Well, it actually did have a tie to that colorful period of history! That association involved a number of Martin County residents including one Henry Huttemeier, an adventurer and one time Fairmont saloon owner and Martin County farmer, who actually made two trips to Alaska.

Huttemeier, a Martin County native, was born in Fraser Township on June 18, 1872. His family, being true pioneers, hauled lumber by ox team from Wells to build their home. Henry Huttemeier stayed on the home place in Fraser Township until he was twenty-six years old. Then, in 1898, his Klondike venture to the gold fields began in earnest. During his exploration of the Klondike, he did many things. Of course, he panned for gold; however, he admittedly didn't strike it rich. In addition, his numerous experiences included being a professional hunter, becoming involved in trading gold mines, and uncovering a cache of prehistoric ivory that measured over nine feet in length and weighed more than 300 pounds.

In detailing Huttermeier's adventure, it is interesting to note that in the late 19th century the news of the Klondike gold rush took months to reach Martin County and the Midwest. This is, of course, in stark contrast to the present day in which instant communication is expected. Soon after learning of the potential riches to the north, the decision was made to participate in the “gold rush.” Jack Johnson, who had previously staked a claim, was considered the instigator of this proposition. In addition to Johnson, the prospecting party included Huttemeier, M. Johnson, Ed Viesselman, Fred Wolter, Sylvan Tonne, Charles Rademacher, George Noben, Fred Farnholz, and J. B. Colton. They left this area by rail in February of 1898, and didn't arrive in Alaska until early June. Although the boat trip from Seattle to Skagway, Alaska, took only four days, the rest of the trip to the Dawson area was extremely slow, difficult, and dangerous. The dangers of this venture was evidenced by the fact that two members of the group died in their search for gold; Tonne from drowning and Farnholz from pneumonia.

Each member of the prospecting team was required by the government to pack 1,800 pounds of food and equipment for their lengthy trek. They first packed their supplies on sleds in traversing the mountain range. Steps had also been chiseled out to make the mountain climb easier. However, when the spring thaws caught up with them, their journey became more difficult as they actually had to stop and build boats in order to transport their supplies and themselves to the inner region of the Yukon.

Upon arriving at the gold fields, they surprisingly found things quite commercialized. As a result, they sought a new gold mining field of their own. They had prospects of becoming millionaires by staking a claim about 200 miles from the main gold field. Eventually, however, this turned out to be somewhat of a “wild goose chase,” as after nearly eighteen months their equipment wore out and the prospecting party was basically left penniless.

Huttemeier returned to Dawson and looked for work. He eventually landed a job with a hunting expedition about 125 miles up the Yukon and Steward rivers. Being quite successful at moose hunting on this expedition, the hunting party returned to Dawson and sold the three moose they shot for forty-six cents a pound. Ironically, this happened to be the first fresh meat brought to Dawson in nearly eight months. Consequently, they finally realized some “gold dust” income, albeit from hunting moose and not panning for gold.

Huttemeier explained that during the “gold rush,” gold mines were bought, sold, and traded freely. However, he further stated that the original owners usually retained half interest in the gold rights. He purchased a mine, and it did prove to be rich. However, after ten months of work and finding the other owner quite uncooperative, he sold his one-sixth interest for \$10,000.00.

He returned to Fairmont and married Sadie Diehl in 1907. He then purchased an interest in the Star Corner Saloon which was located at the present site of Farm Bureau Insurance, 201 Downtown Plaza. He ran the tavern for a number of years with partners Jim Trainor and later a Mr. Lindstaedt. When he began to experience failing health, he went to Rochester to seek medical advice. While there he was told by a doctor that outdoor life was the only thing that would help him. As a result, he went into farming for twenty-nine years in Westford Township. He and his wife retired in 1943 and moved to Fairmont.

Perhaps one of the most significant and lasting possessions in his gold mining experience was a large gold nugget that Huttemeier mined in the Dawson area. He wore this on his watch chain for some time. This nugget evolved into a Klondike nugget necklace that was eventually handed down from Huttemeier to his sister, Mary Reinke. She then gave it to her daughter, Lennie (Reinke) Niss, who in turn gave it to her daughter, Erma (Niss) Rosen. The Klondike nugget necklace was recently handed down to Erma Rosen’s granddaughter, Karen Marie Rosen, on her eighteenth birthday as a graduation present. She is the 5th person to have the Klondike nugget necklace. This Klondike nugget necklace obviously has significant sentimental value to the family members that today cherish Huttemeier’s legacy from the Klondike gold rush days of 1898.

Again, the hardy pioneers and prospectors of the past, including those from Martin County, have provided us with vivid examples of times gone by; in this instance the colorful “Klondike Gold Rush” era of the 19th century. Our heritage, and the history it represents, is truly an important aspect of the present, and it should never be lost or forgotten.

For more information about Henry Huttemeier and the Klondike Nugget Necklace, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.