



• SOURDOUGH CHRONICLES •

THE YEAR OF THE FLOOD

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Muddy water and silt climbed three feet up the walls in an old government building on Dawson City's Front Street. The lingering silt line was a reminder of once swollen waterways. The building should have floated to Alaska down the Yukon River.

I arrived at the tail end of a massive cleanup from the Dawson Flood of '79. Ice jams caused water from the Yukon, Indian, and Klondike rivers to flow through town. Residents paddled the dirt roads of Dawson in canoes and small boats, houses lifted off their foundations, and random objects and artifacts floated through the streets. The water subsided a day later. Over \$200,000 in damages were reported, and it took the summer to restore order.

Dawson City is the land of the midnight sun, the home of the Klondike Gold Rush, where discovering gold is still possible. Back then, to me the town's wooden boardwalks were like giant sluice boxes. My eyes grew weary, obsessed with the chance of spotting sparkling gold nuggets in the muck and pebbles. The price of gold that spring was just under \$240 an ounce, with many believing it would hit as high as \$400 by fall. If I had uncovered a big gold nugget I wouldn't have had to continue as a waitress at what was then the Gold City Hotel (now known as the Westmark).

My partner, Rob, was hired by the federal government as a seasonal fisheries officer from June until September. I tagged along for a wild summer in the land of the lawless and the free. However, I didn't expect the smell of sewage and mold to be part of my summer adventure. The sun heated the wet, flooded earth, releasing a musty cloak of stench that crept from under crumbling buildings and crawled down the muddy roads.

Gumboots were not a consideration when I left Whitehorse, but I would have gladly shelled out \$50—the going rate during the flood—for a pair of black- and brick-coloured rubber footwear. Alas, there were no boots to be had. My feet quickly became encased in dried clay. Thankfully, the Government of Canada provided a two-

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year supply of garbage bags to the fisheries office, which I altered into makeshift mud suits and wall liners for the shower.

While Rob was running the river looking for fish bandits, I spent my days catering to wide-eyed tourists from around the world. The hotel provided luxury rooms and meals for summer visitors eager to catch a glimpse of gold in them thar hills. The restaurant boasted "food as good as you would get in Vancouver." Good food and a clean, dry room were extravagances in this frontier town.

The Gold City Hotel hired a catering crew from Vancouver to wow the tourists with a southern menu and staff. The head chef threw out more fruit and vegetables than he served. Not a blemish was allowed on any produce. This worked well for me. The garbage produce was placed in a box at the back door, and staff took turns carting it home where it was gratefully consumed. (Living in the North, we seldom saw fresh edibles as good as these.) I collected many large glass containers that sat on the library shelves in the fisheries office. I filled them with fruit and sugar, waiting not so patiently for the mixtures to ferment into alcohol. (The end result was horrible.)

Along with the miners that summer were "SLUGs"—which stood for "sleazy, lazy, ugly, and gross"—a self-imposed title for a group of mostly river people inhabiting the Dawson City area during the late 1970s. They lived a free and easy lifestyle as Yukon River hippies, but largely became extinct as winters set in and the cold and dark wore them down. Most vanished by the mid-80s, and while a few are still around, all that remains of the rest are fables.

Rob and I encountered SLUGs while checking fishing nets and commercial-fishing licenses down the Yukon River toward Forty Mile. Naked female SLUGs presented themselves as sprightly water nymphs, hoping to divert Rob's attention from their lack of licenses and excessive salmon catches. Initially, due to his embarrassment and in hopes he could escape the situation, some of them may have gotten away with it, but by the end of the summer Rob had grown callused to the naked, splashing women who approached his fisheries boat.

Diamond Tooth Gerties, Dawson's local gambling hall, was a northern legend then and still is today. Locals met at Gerties to drink, gamble, watch the cancan dancers, and discuss business. The main foyer filled with miners, fishermen, and tourists. When



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it was too packed to breathe, everyone spilled into the streets, where police were saluted with bottles of beer and visitors were intrigued by the lawless concept of drinking alcohol outside the establishment. Even from the street you could hear the piano music grow louder and louder—the cancan girls were coming.

The dancers cartwheeled onto the stage in a fierce blaze of colour. Miners sitting at the tables in front pounded their workboots on the springy wooden floor in time to the ragtime-piano music. As the whistling and hollering increased, the venue shook in response. The crowd calmed only slightly during the half-hour costume change.

Yells for the girls to return filled the air as the raucous revelry continued. Miners tossed gold nuggets on the stage for the dancers. On one night, the nugget throwing became competitive, with gold raining on the girls and some flinching as larger gold rocks bounced off them. The miners went crazy, yelling for the girls to kick higher and higher still. Voices grew hoarse until the curtain finally dropped.

During that summer after the flood, Dawson City was wild and raw. It was as though the floodwaters had washed away people's inhibitions

along with their possessions. Perhaps it was a realization of how fragile we are when challenged by Mother Earth, and that set the stage for life that particularly boisterous summer. The mantra of "live while you can" permeated the air, wound through the dirt roads, and crawled through the doors of local drinking establishments.

We were young, alive, and free. The Yukon was a mecca for those who wanted no boundaries and no rules, and I feel so very fortunate to have seen and been part of it. Looking back, I believe we all knew the world was changing and that this sense of freedom was a gift that few would ever experience—and one that many would avoid at any cost, for that matter.

Travelling to Dawson City today, I sense the ghosts of hippies past. Those river SLUGs are just a memory, but I swear I can still catch glimpses of them on the streets. Their free spirits, the spirits of the miners, and the spirits and culture of the Hän people are the backbone of this northern community, creating an inimitable atmosphere. Today, when I need a fix of the old Yukon, I go to Dawson City and let the memories creep into my soul. **Y**

Dedicated to my friend Ronnie McPhee, "The Leprechaun River Slug."