

# TRAVEL



ACTING EDITOR LINDA BATES 604-605-2371 / FAX 604-605-2521 / E-mail lbates@pug.canwest.com

SATURDAY, MARCH 8, 2003 SECTION E

## A NEW VIEW OF ALASKA

Taking the ferry gives visitors a local view of Alaska's glories, E6

## DINING IN THE CLOUDS

Cutbacks mean more passengers pack their own in-flight meals, E11

See EXCURSIONS OFFER E3

# Icebike trek gets a leg up with a toe cocktail

**I**n the freezing cold February of 1900 a young man by the name of Ed Jesson began an amazing cycling expedition that began in Yukon Territory and ended on the west coast of Alaska. When he rode his bicycle into Nome on March 29 he carried with him copies of newspapers that he had packed at the start of his trip, bringing what was then the latest news to the residents of the community. This week Kevin Vallely, Andy Sterns and Frank Wolf (left to right in picture) left Dawson City, Yukon, and began following the route Jesson had blazed. Inseparable from the mystique of Yukon is the name of Jack London, another adventurer who arrived in Dawson City at the age of 21 and wrote vividly about his impressions of the North and the characters he met there. This is what he had to say about the Yukon River, the frozen path Kevin, Frank and Andy are following to the sea.

"North and south, as far as his eye could see, it was unbroken white, save for a dark hairline that

Kevin Vallely



ICEBIKERS

curved and twisted from around the spruce-covered island to the South, and that curved and twisted away into the north, where it disappeared behind another spruce-covered island. This dark hairline was the trail — the main trail ... that led north 70 miles to Dawson, and still on to the north a thousand miles to Nulato, and finally to St. Michael, on Bering Sea, a thousand miles and half a thousand more." From the words of Jack London we can visualize the trail that Ed Jesson would have gazed upon in 1900. It would have been much travel, would have been hard and fast and would have been perfect for fast cycling. Jesson was rarely forced to walk his bike and would have made fast progress as he headed north. Much has changed in the last 100 years. The river is a less secure place for travel these days. Jumbled ice, overflow and open water make travel a much more difficult and tenuous proposition and we are constantly reminded that we are riding on an ephemeral surface that will eventually be absorbed into the water than runs below it.

**M**Y EYES ARE FIXED ON THE small package that sits on the table in front of me. As I slowly peel back the layers of cloth I catch glimpses of skin, leathery and dark. Cleanly prepared, the big toe looks as fresh as the day it was surgically removed from the generous woman who donated it two years earlier. I hold the leathery morsel and drop it into my glass, pour in a stiff shot of gin and tip it to my lips. As I drink, the toe slowly glides down the glass to rest on my lips and I resist opening my mouth too wide as I drink the gin. "We've lost three toes that way" explains Captain Dick, the keeper of toe and the overseer of this most strange of rituals. "Eaten ... swallowed rather", he explains. "The tombstone out front of the bar lists the dates of their demise." I slam the glass to the table, shake hands with the Captain and proudly accept my Sourtoe Cocktail Club Membership Card number 8378. We've officially arrived in Dawson City. Nestled at the confluence of



CATHIE ARCHBOULD/VANCOUVER SUN FILES

The aurora borealis ripples with colour over the Yukon River.

the Klondike and Yukon rivers, Dawson sits almost frozen in time, its gravel streets lined by wooden boardwalks and beautifully restored clapboard buildings reflecting the architecture, circa 1900. I feel like I've stepped back 100 years.

During the Gold Rush Dawson

swelled to some 40,000 people, but these days only 600 call this Parks Canada protected historic site their year-round home.

Andy Sterns flew in from Fairbanks, Alaska to join Frank and me in Dawson. At five feet, seven inches, his pencil like

See 40-MILE AREA E4

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## 40-Mile area inspired well-known Jack London story

frame carries a mere 130 pounds (60 kilograms). His unassuming appearance disguises a master outdoorsman with the "tough as nails" disposition that typifies so many folk up here.

Ten years ago while warming up for a cross-country ski race, Andy lost control and smashed head first into a tree. He was paralysed for six months and was told he'd never walk again.

Not only does he now walk, but he has since mushed the Iditarod Sled Dog Race twice and skied its entire 1,860-km length. His ability to overcome adversity is humbling and he makes our team something to be reckoned with.

We've made our final preparations and are ready to set off towards Nome. The Yukon River, which is ice-free in Whitehorse, seems to be well frozen here in Dawson and beckons us to follow it North. Our next few days will take us through a section of river that inspired Jack London to write his short story *To Build A Fire*.

Describing an inept gold miner making his way to a mining camp in the 40 Mile country of the Yukon basin, London weaves a tale about the dangers of northern travel. The inexperience and arrogance of the miner makes him ignore the dropping temperature and finally sees him freeze to death after he breaks through thin ice and desperately makes a fire with his last match only to have it extinguished by the snow perched on the pine bows of the tree above him. The tale leaves us with thoughts of what nature is capable of.

If conditions are good we hope to reach Eagle, Alaska in three days and after that northwards to the Arctic Circle.

On the Web see [www.bikesonice.com](http://www.bikesonice.com)

*Next morning, I believe it was 23 of February and the thermometer down to 48 below zero ... The rubber tires on my wheel were frozen hard and stiff as gas pipe. The oil in my bearings was frozen and I could scarcely ride it and my nose was freezing and I had to hold the handlebars with both hands, not being able to ride yet with one hand and rub my nose with the other.... It was still cold next morning but we had a short run in to Eagle Feb. 25. Everyone tries to take it easy during the cold spells and avoid long hard runs, it very seldom pays and is quite a hardship. I had not been able to ride the wheel much and it looked like a white elephant on my hands but one good thing it didn't eat anything and I didn't have to cook dogfeed for it. The heartbreaking job of cooking dogfeed after a hard day's run and waiting for it to cool and then watching them eat and see that the big bullies don't take everything from the timid ones is what made Scotty Allen's hair white. Then the dog musher's work is about through for the day whenever that is ... In Eagle I met Walter King, Mahoney and Hayes headed for Nome. We left Eagle March 1st, 1900 at 7:30 a.m. arriving at Star at 11 a.m. We had a big caribou dinner and I loaded them up with all the caribou meat they cared to haul and loaned them my wolf robe and two of my best dogs with the agreement that if I broke down with the wheel I should continue thru with them if they overtook me on the trail.*

DIARY OF ED JESSON; FROM DAWSON TO NOME ON A BICYCLE



VANCOUVER SUN FILES

A photo taken in 1897 shows writer Jack London looking youthful and clean-shaven (second from left), at a camp on the Klondike gold rush trail in Yukon Territory.