

## Story Title: EARLY TRADERS AND STEAMBOATS

### Quotations:

That title [“Father of the Yukon”] had been bestowed on him by the miners in the Yukon ... His name was a byword for integrity and honesty. His trust in his fellow man was unbounded and seldom wrong. Nowhere in the literature of the Yukon is it possible to find a critical or unkind word about him. It is rare anywhere to find a man as highly regarded during his own lifetime as was Jack McQuesten.

– R.C. Coutts, *Yukon Places & Names*, p. 175.

It is hardly necessary to say that those three boats, *Yukon*, *St. Michael*, and *New Racket*, were not large. They could not be under the conditions. Seventy to eighty feet in length, and fourteen to twenty wide, with a depth of hull from three to four feet was about the average. As a rule, however, they were fitted with powerful machinery for their size. With the crew, a fair supply of wood, and a few passengers, they were crowded. As a transport motor, they shoved small barges each capable of carrying about ten tons. With four or five of these in tow the Yukon could make a round trip from St. Michael to any point in the vicinity of the boundary line in about a month, the up-stream time being about twenty days.

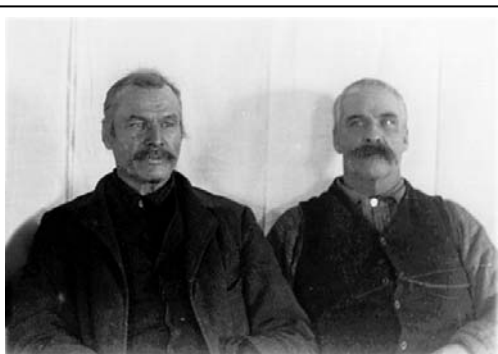
– William Ogilvie, *Early Days in the Yukon*, pp. 75-76.

### Main Messages

- The development of the Yukon River basin and many early mining discoveries owe much to three early traders and explorers: Leroy Napoleon “Jack” McQuesten, Alfred Henry Mayo and Arthur Francis Sean Harper.
- In the spring of 1887, the three men and their families established a store at the mouth of the Fortymile River, the basis for the settlement of Forty Mile.
- The traders would not have been able to operate without trade goods and a more-or-less reliable supply network. This story will briefly profile four of the first steamboats on the Yukon River: the *Yukon*, the *St. Michael*, *New Racket* and the *Arctic*.

## THE STORY

### Early Traders



Jack McQuesten & Al Mayo.  
Cropped from: *Bancroft Library, Davidson Coll.*,  
1946.6.26

Three influential frontiersmen and prospectors had much to do with the early non-native settlement and development of the upper Yukon River basin including the site that eventually became the Forty Mile community. Jack McQuesten, Al Mayo and Arthur Harper encouraged mining exploration, providing good advice based on their knowledge of the country. The traders grubstaked prospectors, giving them credit on their supplies until they could mine enough to pay off their bills. The three built a store at Forty Mile in 1887, making the development of the community possible. For over 20 years, they operated trading posts all along the Yukon River

between Rampart, Alaska and Fort Selkirk. All three owed much to their First Nations wives, Koyukon women from the lower Yukon River. These women were true partners, at home in both cultures, who acted as links between First Nations people and the newcomers. (To learn more about these women, read the “Forty Mile Women” story.)

**Leroy Napoleon “Jack” McQuesten (1836-1909)**

McQuesten was born in Maine but mostly grew up in Illinois. As a young man, he moved north and west, eventually becoming an employee of the Hudson’s Bay Company. After leaving the organization, he went into the fur trade on his own. In 1871, McQuesten was at Great Slave Lake when he learned that the United States had purchased Alaska. A group determined to go to the Yukon to look for gold.

On 15 August 1873, McQuesten and his party, including Al Mayo, reached Fort Yukon by crossing the Mackenzie Mountains, and travelling the Bell and Porcupine Rivers. Arthur Harper had arrived with another party a few weeks before and had already gone up the Yukon River to prospect. McQuesten met an agent from the Alaska Commercial Co. at Fort Yukon who let them have 50 lbs of flour; the first they had had for five years. After a winter of trapping and hunting, the pair signed on with the Alaska Commercial Company (A.C.Co.) at St. Michael, funding their prospecting by trading in the fur rich country.

Responding to a request from Catsah, chief of the “Trondick Indians”, McQuesten and a helper established Fort Reliance in 1874; the first trading post in Tr’ondëk Hwëch’ in traditional territory. The Hän helped to put up the building and kept them supplied with meat all that winter. The Fortymile and Sixtymile rivers were later named for their estimated distance from Fort Reliance.



McQuesten met his future wife Katharine (Satejdenalno) in 1874; the pair married four years later. Over the next 12 years, he worked at Fort Yukon, Tanana Station and other posts until he followed the miners to Forty Mile in 1887. When gold was discovered downriver at Birch Creek in 1892, McQuesten grubstaked half the miners who set off to check out the new area. When the new diggings proved even richer than Fortymile, McQuesten followed in 1894 and set up a store at Circle, Alaska.

McQuesten and his

family moved to California in 1897 where he died in 1909.

Jack McQuesten became the first president of the Yukon Order of Pioneers (YOOP) at the organization's founding meeting December 1, 1894. Their motto was the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would be done by." This could easily have been the personal credo of the man fondly known as the "Father of the Yukon."

### **Arthur Francis Sean Harper (1835-1898)**

Harper was born in County Antrim, Ireland. As a young man he became one of the persistent prospectors and miners who moved ever northward from the California diggings, prospecting and mining. In 1873 he travelled with a group down the Mackenzie River, over the Mackenzie Mountains to the Porcupine River, and arrived at Fort Yukon in July 1873. Harper and his companions spent the winter of 1873/74 at the mouth of the White River followed by a summer near Tanana Station. He found nothing that paid so Harper joined McQuesten and Mayo in working for the Alaska Commercial Company.

Harper met and married 14-year-old Jennie Bosco (*Seentahna*) in 1874. He was a restless man, constantly setting off to explore new country and leaving his wife and their children behind for periods as long as two years. He spent time on the Sixtymile River, at Fort Reliance and Eagle.

Gold was discovered in Forty Mile in the fall of 1886 and the Harpers moved to Forty Mile in the spring of 1887 to help build and operate the store. As soon as the *New Racket* tied up with 10 tons of supplies, Harper set up a crate for a counter and a set of scales as a cash register, and sold everything right off the barge. Three years later, Arthur moved his family to Fort Selkirk on the steamer *Yukon*, opening a store at the former site of Hudson's Bay Company post, abandoned in 1852. The geologist, Israel Russell, met him at this time and described Harper as "a hardy Scotchman" and "one of the most genial and best informed men that I met in Central Alaska."

Some called him "Bad Luck Harper" because, although he encouraged and advised many prospectors who eventually became wealthy, Harper never stayed in one place long enough to mine his own fortune. Harper left his First Nations wife in 1895, moved out of the Yukon, and died of tuberculosis in Yuma, Arizona in 1897.

### **Alfred "Al" Henry Mayo (1847-1924)**

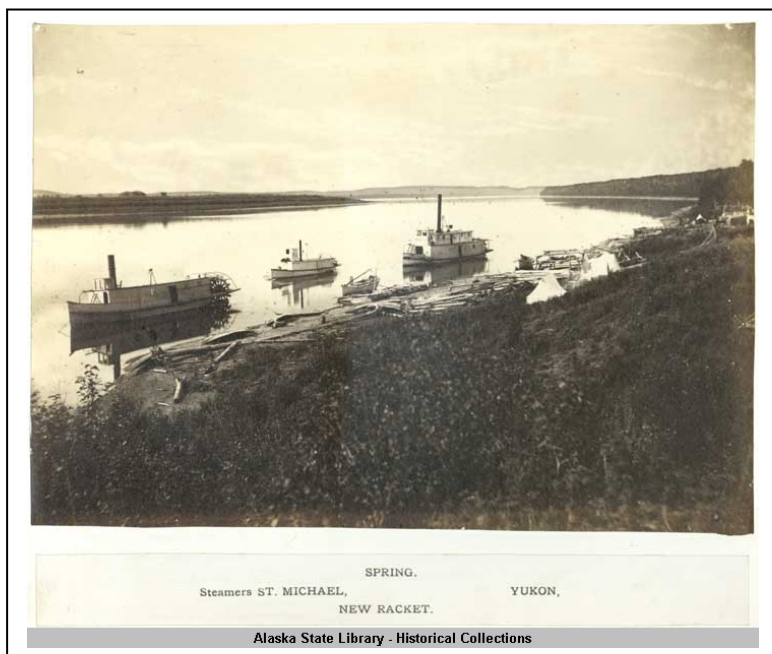
Al Mayo was born in Bangor, Maine and worked as a circus acrobat in his youth. In later years, he amazed his First Nations friends with his athletic feats. He too was drawn to the northwest corner of the continent seeking adventure, fur and gold. He married Margaret (Neehunilthnoh), daughter of the chief at Nuklukayet in 1874. They and the Harpers were at Fort Reliance in 1875. After the arsenic incident at Reliance, the Mayos and the Harpers moved to Tanana where they ran the trading post for eight years.

In 1884, Mayo was at Fort Reliance. Sixteen men wintered at Reliance in 1885/86 but everyone's attention was focussed on the Stewart River where the prospectors were having very good finds. The partners built a post they called Fort Nelson in 1886 to service the growing population of prospectors. Mayo was manning the post at Fort Nelson when news of the Fortymile strike reached the camp. After the strike at Forty Mile, the Mayos joined his partners to operate the Forty Mile store and some of his children attended school at Buxton Mission. The family moved on to Tanana Station in 1894. In later years, he was known as Captain or "Cap" Mayo due to his role as skipper of the *New Racket*.

Of the three partners, Al Mayo was the only one to end his days in the north. The Mayo family finally settled at Rampart, Alaska where Mayo died on July 17, 1924.

The legacy of these pioneers can be found in various Yukon landscape features. William Ogilvie named Mount Harper, a peak in the Tombstone Range, in 1887-88. Al Mayo is best remembered by the community on the Stewart River that bears his name, although there is also a Mayo Lake and Mayo River. Early miners named a major tributary of the [Stewart River](#) after McQuesten when he was operating Fort Nelson at the mouth of the Stewart in 1885. Apparently Yukon Jack, the 100-proof Canadian whiskey and honey based liquor, was also named after Jack McQuesten!

### Early Yukon River Steamboats



After the United States purchased the territory of Alaska from Russia in 1867, American traders began using the main Russian supply route. This extended up the Alaskan coast then hundreds of miles inland up the Yukon River from St. Michael, the settlement near the river mouth. Improved supply delivery and increased development were made possible after the Alaska Commercial Company began using steamships in 1869. Below are brief profiles of four early vessels.

### *Yukon* (1868-18??)

The *Yukon* was first owned by Parrott and Co., one of the predecessors of the Alaska Commercial Company and launched on the Yukon River in 1868.

Captain Raymond of the US Navy used this steamer on his 1869 mission to determine the Alaskan Boundary. This resulted in the eviction of the Hudson's Bay Company from Fort Yukon, when he found their post at Rampart House was on American territory.

Francois Mercier described a trip on the *Yukon* in July 1874. The steamboat was hauling three barges and took a month to travel 1500 miles upriver to Fort Yukon. The steamer then continued upstream to unload Jack McQuesten and his supplies at the future site of Fort Reliance. Every day, the boat had to tie up for six hours so the crew could cut firewood for fuel. When Lt. Schwatka travelled down the Yukon River in 1883, he noted that the stockade of Fort Yukon had been dismantled to fuel the *Yukon*. In 1889, this vessel carried Arthur Harper, his family and their supplies when the trader set up a post at Fort Selkirk.

### ***St. Michael*** (1879 to 1914)

This vessel, similar in size to the *Yukon*, was purchased by the Western Fur and Trading Company and brought north in 1879. This was a San Francisco company organized to compete with the Alaska Commercial Company. When the Alaska Commercial Company bought out their rivals in 1883, the *St. Michael* became one of the A.C.Co. assets. This steamboat joined the *Yukon* in exploring and supplying the Yukon River basin. It was wrecked on the Koyukuk River in 1914.

### ***New Racket*** (1882-18??)

In 1882, the Schiefflin brothers from Arizona decided to try their luck mining on the Yukon River and its tributaries. They chartered a vessel to St. Michael and on its decks packed a little river steamer. When the brothers decided to return to Arizona a year later, they sold their boat, the *New Racket*, to McQuesten, Mayo and Harper. Mayo became skipper of the noisy little vessel that eventually travelled upriver as far as Fort Selkirk and operated on the river for many years. This hardworking vessel was even used in gold-mining when Al Mayo adapted the water pump to wash paydirt for miners on the Stewart River in 1886. The miners made \$1000 each from the venture and paid the boat owners an equal amount.

### ***Arctic*** (1889-1897)

Construction of the *Arctic* in 1889 heralded a new era of larger boats and increased activity in the Yukon River basin. This A.C.Co. vessel was the first major sternwheeler on the Yukon River and, due to its greater capacity for supplies, was credited with helping to establish Forty Mile as a permanent settlement. On her maiden voyage, however, the hull was holed within 17 miles of St. Michael. When he heard the news, McQuesten asked the miners to go “Outside” for the winter fearing months of starvation. The boat was repaired and back in business by 1890. In 1895, this vessel travelled 14,000 miles during the short navigation season, a record at that time. The *Arctic* was the first boat to dock at the site of Dawson City in 1896.

Built: 1889 at St. Michael for Alaska Commercial Company

Length: 140 feet

Width: 30 feet

Draft: 4 feet

Capacity: 250 tons

Wrecked: 1897 in an ice jam at Circle City during spring break-up

### **Ways to Tell the Story**

- Use a map to show the routes used by Harper, McQuesten and Mayo to travel into the country as well as places that they subsequently explored, prospected and set up posts. Stress that, until then, the country was largely unknown to non-natives.
- Read the “Forty Mile Women” story to learn about the First Nations wives of these three men and discuss their roles in these successful partnerships.
- Use a map and talk to discuss the long supply line and methods of transport required to deliver supplies to the posts of the Yukon River basin. Stress the importance of these supplies in supporting the miners and the dire situation if a boat couldn’t arrive before freeze-up or was late in spring.

- Invite visitors to imagine the challenges of early steamboating on the Yukon River: no maps, not knowing the river channel or what might be around the next bend, needing to make frequent stops to cut fuel wood with hand tools, having to be prepared to do your own repairs, prying the vessel off gravel bars, etc.
- Point to a stand of trees that would have been required to fuel one of the ships for a day.

### **Related Stories**

- Alaska Commercial Company
- Forty Mile Women
- N.A.T.T. and other businesses

### **Other Resources**

#### Books

Bennett, Gordon

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1977 *Recollections of Leroy N. McQuesten: Life in the Yukon, 1871-1885*. Dawson City, Yukon Order of Pioneers.

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1894 *Along Alaska's Great River*. St. Louis, Mo.: J.W. Henry

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1976 *Prelude to Bonanza*. Sidney, B. C., Gray's Publishing Ltd.

Photographs

Traders Tom O'Brien, Jack McQuesten and Al Mayo. Bancroft Library, Davidson Coll., 1946.6.26.

Steamer *Yukon*. From Frederick Schwatka, *Along Alaska's Great River*, p. 276.

Harper's garden at Nuklakayet in 1883, "the northernmost garden in the United States." From Frederick Schwatka, *Along Alaska's Great River*, p. 306.

*S.S. St. Michael* grounded on a bar near Fort Yukon. In Bennett, p. 18 (originally in F. Schwatka, *Report of a Military Reconnaissance in Alaska, Made in 1883* [Wash. D.C.: GPO, 1885], p. 45.

Alaska State Library, SLED, Alaska's Digital Archives. Schieffelin Album  
<http://vilda.alaska.edu/cgi-in/docviewer.exe?CISOROOT=/cdmg21&CISOPTR=961&CISOSHOW=906>