

Clarence Berry One of First to Strike It Rich at Klondike

FAIRBANKS — Clarence J. Berry was one of the first to strike it rich in the Klondike at the end of the last century, and he held on to his fortune, enlarged it through wise investment, and lived comfortably for the rest of his days. At his untimely death in 1930 he left an estate that was to benefit a multitude of family heirs for many generations.

Now, in his memory, the Berry Holding Company, the company which his death created and which is still made up of family members, has pledged \$25,000 to establish a gold display room in the University of Alaska's museum here. An initial payment of \$10,000, which will permit planning and construction of the "Gold Room," has been received.

In addition, the company will offer in Berry's memory three \$1,000 scholarships to students



CLARENCE J. BERRY

in the university's College of Earth Sciences and Mineral In-

dustry beginning with the 1973-74 academic year. In the current year, in lieu of the scholarships, the company has given \$3,000 to the college. It is an unrestricted gift, to be used as the college desires.

Earl Beistline, dean of the college and provost of the university's Northern Region, is working closely with the company to help carry out its wishes.

Berry, a strong, broad-shouldered man, had been a fruit farmer in Selma, California. The depressions of the 1890's foreclosed all opportunity for him there and in 1894 he decided to try his luck prospecting in Alaska.

Word of the Klondike discovery in 1897 reached him at Fortymile where, penniless, he was tending bar for saloonkeeper Bill McPhee to support himself and his young wife Ethel,

whom he had brought north with him after a return trip to California.

With a grubstake from McPhee, Berry headed for the Klondike, staked a claim on Bonanza Creek, and within a year was a wealthy man.

In his book, "The Klondike Fever," Pierre Berton wrote of Berry: "He was sober, honest, hard-working, ambitious, and home-loving, and he stayed that way. Of all the original locators on Bonanza and Eldorado (creeks) there is scarcely one other to whom these statements apply."

Back at Fortymile after having staked his Klondike claim, Berry encountered Antone Stander who had also staked a claim in the Klondike and now, destitute, was trying to find a friend to help him obtain provisions so he could begin mining operations, Berton recounted.

Berry became that friend and Stander, out of gratitude, "traded Berry half of his Eldorado property for half of a claim that Berry had staked on Upper Bonanza," Berton wrote. "With this simple gesture Berry laid the foundations for one of the largest personal fortunes to come out of the Klondike."

To work their claims after winter had set in, the miners of that time would build fires to thaw the frozen ground.

In her thesis for a mining engineering degree from the University of Alaska, entitled "The Evolution of Placer Mining Methods in Alaska," Genevieve A. Parker credits Berry with a part in the development of steam points, implements for injecting steam into the ground.

Steam proved far more efficient than fire for thawing. One of Berry's first steam points was a rifle barrel secured to the end of a steam hose.

From the Klondike Berry went on to the Fairbanks area where he carried on successful mining operations on Ester Creek. For many years the post office at Ester was known as the Berry Post Office. Later he mined on Eagle, Mammoth and Mastodon creeks in the Circle mining district.

Wrote Berton: "Berry took a million and a half dollars from his claims on Eldorado. Then he and his brothers moved on to Fairbanks where they struck it rich a second time on Ester Creek."

They returned to California, secured oil property near Bakersfield, and made another enormous fortune."

Berry was known as a generous man. Berton told of his placing in front of his Klondike cabin a coal-oil can full of gold and a bottle of whisky beside it and a sign above them with the terse message: "Help Yourself."

And, recounted Berton, "Berry never forgot his original benefactor, Bill McPhee, the saloonkeeper. In 1906 McPhee's saloon at Fairbanks was destroyed by fire and the aging barkeeper lost everything."

Berry wired him from San Francisco to draw on him for all the money necessary to get back into business again. In his declining years McPhee lived on a pension from Berry, who died of appendicitis in San Francisco in 1930.

Now the University of Alaska museum staff under the direction of L. J. Rowinski is beginning to assemble the items that will go into the "Gold Room" and make plans for the acquisition of gold specimens.

A bronze plaque with the likeness of Berry in relief by Sculptor Spero Anagyras of San Francisco will be commissioned separately by Berry Holding Company and mounted at the room entrance.

A vault-type display case will house gold in all its forms: ore, nuggets, dust, and likely some worked gold. There will be displays of artifacts from the gold rush period including some of Berry's steam points and a collection of points donated by Mrs. James Barrack. Rowinski estimates the room will be completed in late spring.

"Not only does the gold exhibit project, supported by the C. J. Berry Holding Company, allow us to call attention to the achievements of an individual but it also provides us with an opportunity to exhibit some of the interesting and valuable material from the museum collections that could not be shown before," said the museum director.

"The results of Berry's good fortune are now being made available to the public and the

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university, and it is an excellent gesture by the family in honor of an early-day Alaskan who made a major contribution to mining," said Beistline. "And it is fitting that we have a major exhibit on the gold rush era one of the most colorful, significant periods in Alaska and Yukon history."

Representatives of the Berry family and the Berry Holding Company visited Alaska last summer to inspect ground at Mammoth Creek off the Steese Highway still owned by the company and to discuss arrangements with Beistline for the museum project and the awarding of the scholarships.

The visitors were Mr. and Mrs. C. J. Bennett, Dr. and Mrs. Ralph Busch, and Mr. and Mrs. W. R. Bradley.