

# “YUKON JACK”

## Part I

by Cecil Munsey

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- He was a Pioneering Gold Prospector Who Innovatively Used Perry Davis’ Painkiller;
- He inspired the Creation of the Classic Milk-Glass Figural, “Klondike” Pocket-Flask;
- He had “*The Black Sheep of Canadian Liquors*” Named After Him;
- He was Among the First Americans to Marry a Koyukon Athabascan Indian Woman

### PROLOGUE

A genealogical search is always an interesting journey filled with many twists, turns and surprises. While doing genealogical research on *William Munsey*, who was the first Munsey to come to America (1698), I discovered the completely unrelated name of *William McQuesten*. The McQuesten name appears in America as early as 1720. Both *Williams* originated in the British Isles and came to New England and both made historic contributions to America’s early development.

The Munsey group’s most famous member was Frank Andrew Munsey (1854-1925), the great magazine and newspaper publisher. The McQuesten’s most famous group member was [Figure 1] Leroy Napoleon (“Jack”) McQuesten (1836-1909), a well known explorer, trader, prospector and pioneer of the Yukon Territory and the man for whom Yukon Jack, the 100 proof Canadian whiskey and honey-based liqueur, was named. Both historic figures became famous multi-millionaires as a result of their very different pioneering efforts. This is the brief history of:

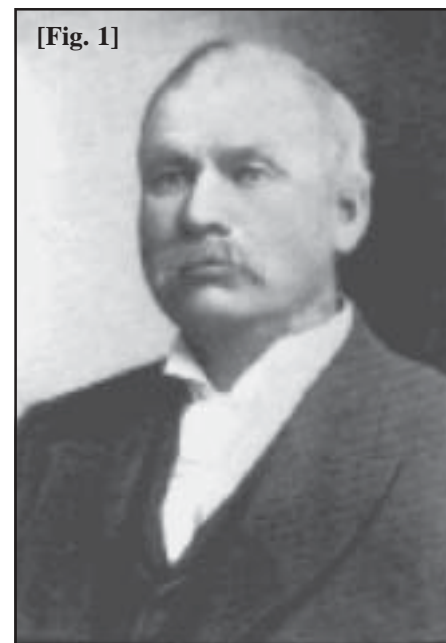
### “Yukon” Jack McQuesten

In his late teens, Jack left his home in the State of Maine to try his luck in the famous 1849 California gold rush. Not striking it rich, within a few years he moved to Oregon. There he fought in the “Oregon War” against the Walla Walla Indians who were on the warpath at that time. In 1858 he went north to British

Columbia in the gold rush to the Fraser River gold fields. He lived in the northern country, trapping and trading with Indian tribes near the Mackenzie River.

Eventually, while prospecting on the Mackenzie River, he crossed the Rocky Mountains (in 1873) and worked a gold claim on the Porcupine River all the way to the outposts of the Alaska Commercial Co. on the Yukon River. In 1874 Jack established Fort Reliance, a trading post, about six miles below present-day city of Dawson (Northwest Territory). In 1879 the Hudson Bay Co. employed him to run their trading post and later he did the same for the Alaska Commercial Co.

He used Fort Reliance as his trading



[Fig. 1]

post for about a dozen years. While at the Fort he made the *first* weather record of the Yukon – that was in 1880-81. It was during the same period that Jack became widely known as the inventor of the “*Sourdough Thermometer*.”

### Perry Davis Painkiller Innovated [ SOURDOUGH THERMOMETER ]

The thermometer, of special interest to bottle collectors, consisted of a row of four bottles, each containing either mercury, coal oil, Jamaica Ginger or Perry Davis’ Painkiller.

The bottles were set outside where they could be seen from a window. If the mercury froze, it was **minus 40°C (–40°F)**.



[Fig. 2]

The coal oil froze at **minus 45°C (-49°F)**. If the Jamaica ginger froze, it was **minus 51°C (-59.8° F)**. The ultimate measuring device of Jack's *Sourdough Thermometer* was the fourth bottle – Perry Davis' Painkiller [Figure 2]. The patent medicine would turn white at **minus 51°C (-59.8° F)**, crystallize at **minus 57°C (-00001° F)**, and freeze solid at **minus 60°C (-76°F)**.

Jack's thermometer was very popular outside roadhouses between Whitehorse and Dawson. Most stayed home when the mercury froze, but when the painkiller froze, it was considered unsafe to travel very far from a fire. It has been said the invention saved many lives in that harsh climate.

Arthur Harper, Alfred Mayo, and Leroy N. "Jack" McQuesten were three traders and prospectors who made their way overland to the Yukon River basin from British Columbia. They traded for furs and developed ties with Native people. Rumors of gold in the Yukon River basin persisted among prospectors, and American veterans of the gold rushes in California and British Columbia started to arrive. For over two decades, these three American traders supplied prospectors in the Yukon River basin. Their trading posts, operated for the Alaska Commercial Company as well as their own stores, were long lasting.

All three men married Koyukon Athabaskan Indian women. Kate McQuesten, Jennie Harper, and Margaret Mayo initiated their white partners into the Athabaskan world. Just as in Native society, these women provided the essential family ties that enabled their husbands to live in a land of strangers.

In the summer of **1884** miners discovered gold on the Steward River. The miners called it 'grubstake diggings' because one could pan just enough gold to buy supplies for another winter of prospecting. Taking advantage of the strike, the McQuesten, Mayo, and Harper families established Fort Nelson at the mouth of the Steward River.

In **1893** Jack McQuesten established Circle City, Alaska as a trading center twelve miles upstream from its present location.

The three partners and their families also constructed a log trading post at Fortymile, which became the first White town on the Yukon River. By **1895** Fortymile had two trading posts, two saloons, an opera house, an Anglican mission, and a contingent of Northwest Mounted Police.

Following the gold strikes on Birch Creek in **1894**, the McQuestens started an Alaska Commercial Company store at Circle City. After word of the Klondike discovery reached Circle, the city emptied as miners moved to Dawson. Fearing the dismal conditions in the boomtown of Dawson and a pending food shortage, Jack, at the well-worn age of 58, retired and moved his family to Berkeley, California.

Jack had discovered gold on Stewart Run sometime after **1894** and he amassed a fortune estimated to be upwards of two million dollars. Along with his other assets, he brought a metric ton of gold dust with him when he moved back to the States – at the 1894 price of \$20.67 a troy ounce, that metric ton of gold was worth \$664,541.

### Jack McQuesten's Heritage

Leroy Napoleon "Jack" McQuesten was known at various times as "*Yukon Jack*," "*Captain Jack*," "*Golden Rule McQuesten*," "*Old Jack*," "*Father of Alaska*," and "*Father of*

*the Yukon*." At the very least, he was very well known.

There is a river that flows into the Yukon River named McQuesten River. There is also an area known as the McQuesten Mineral Belt and in 1896, a record 25,000 new gold claims were staked in the Yukon most of them in the McQuesten Mineral Belt.

Jack is quite well remembered in history for grubstaking many of the miners who participated in the various gold rushes. And he was considered the expert on the boundary between Alaska and Canada.

Popular writer of the times, Gordon Bettles, is quoted as having said:

*"Upon reaching Forty Mile on May 15, 1888, I had the pleasure of meeting L. N. (Jack) McQuesten, Al Mayo, Fred Hart, and A. Harper, the old timers of the Yukon and as fine a bunch of men as could be found in any part of our country. The one most spoken of was McQuesten, but always as 'Old Jack.' When the name Jack was mentioned by anyone, the person spoken to understood at once whom the person was being referred to. Volumes could be written of the good traits of Old Jack."*

The famous author, Jack London [Figure 3], was a friend of "Yukon" Jack McQuesten, and was impressed with his life story. He used Jack as the hero in one of his

stories. The story is woven around a prospector who married an Indian of the North, deserted her, but rejoined her. (Jack never deserted Kate.) The story, "*The Wife of a King*," was first published in *Overland Monthly*, Vol. 34, August 1899.

Some have speculated that the nickname "Yukon Jack" referred to Jack London but most evidence points to McQuesten as the original Yukon Jack.

### "The Black Sheep of Canadian Liquors"

Yukon Jack – a 100 proof (50% alcohol) Canadian whiskey and honey-based liqueur [Figure 4] was named after Jack McQuesten. It is supposedly an artist's inspired rendering of McQuesten, trudging through the snow all bundled up in a parka, that is featured today on the label of bottles of Yukon Jack.

### Katherine ("Kate") James Satejdenalno McQuesten

Katherine ("Kate") James Satejdenalno McQuesten (1860-1921) was among the very first Athabascans to marry an American. As the wife of the senior trader she played an important role in integrating the White and Native cultures of the North.

Kate was born in 1860 at Kokrines to a Koyukon Athabaskan mother and Russian father. She was educated at Russian Mission and was 18 when she married 42-year-old trader Leroy Napoleon "Jack" McQuesten. Over the next 20 years, the couple traveled up and down the Yukon River opening trading posts. Kate had eleven children during their long marriage. The first three died young



[Fig. 3]



[Fig. 4]



(before 1888). **Figure 5** pictures Kate McQuesten and four of their children (left to right) Lizzie, Julia, Crystal and Henry.

From an article entitled, "*The Father of the Yukon*" by the New York Journal, December 1, 1897, Jack can be quoted as saying,

"Yes, indeed, women have a good opportunity in the Klondike. Good women have every chance to make money there, and the hardships are comparatively few."

Jack and Kate retired and lived in their Victorian mansion in Berkeley, California until they died – Jack in 1909 and Kate in 1921.

#### "Klondike" Flask

One of bottle-collecting's classic figural bottles is the Klondike flask [**Figure 6**]. The rather small six-inch-high milk glass bottle is shaped like a mountain or glacier. Originally the bottle featured brown and gold paint over much of the milk glass. The flask has a metal screw-lid that sealed the threaded neck and covered the ground-off top of the bottle.

It has been believed by many that the bottle was inspired and made just before the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to commemorate the great Klondike gold strike in the Yukon Territory. Supposedly, besides the strike itself, the bottle honored the pioneering prospectors who, like Yukon Jack McQuesten, made the gold strike possible.

**[Part II of "YUKON JACK" will appear in the next issue of *Bottles & Extras*. It will expand on Mark Twain's experiences with "...the Painkiller" and will offer a capsule history of the famous Perry Davis' Painkiller.]**

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[Fig. 5]

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<http://users.stargate.net/skye>

Jack London:

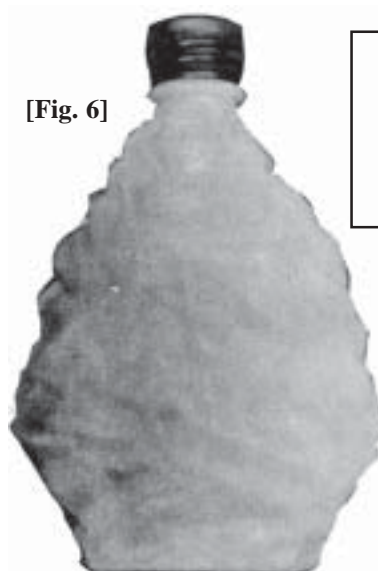
<http://sunssite.berkeley.edu/london/>

Jack London:

<http://www.parks.sonoma.net/jlstory.html>

Jack London:

<http://www.geocities.com/jacklondon/>



[Fig. 6]

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