

Skagway, Alaska....

home of hustlers, outlaws and dreamers

By JEFF BRADY
Staff Writer

Long distances are deceiving. If I told you I could drive you 4,570 miles in eight days to a lively little gold-rush town called Skagway in Southeast Alaska, you would probably tell me that I was crazy. Many have. But if I said that awaiting you there would be a job to your liking and wealth beyond your wildest dreams, you might become a victim to the take.

My little con never fails. Last May three of my friends — Rouse Wilson, Bruce Lentz and Karen Rhyne — grabbed the lure. I was returning for my second summer as bunkhouse manager and taxi driver. I assured my friends that they would find similar jobs the day we arrived.

Our route was simple: draw a line across the continent from Chapel Hill to Skagway and follow the best roads.

At Prince Rupert in northwest British Columbia, we picked up the Alaska Marine Highway, a system of large ferries that serves communities along the Inside Passage. The passage, often compared to the fiords of Norway for its beauty, is a narrow 400-mile waterway that cuts through the mountainous Southeast Alaska panhandle. Skagway is the northern terminus of the ferry route, 36 hours from Prince Rupert and

70 miles north of Juneau, the state capital. Cruising up the Taiya Inlet into Skagway Bay, the town does not look any different from the one you see on the post card. It looks quite peaceful, just the right size for its 850 residents.

But after disembarking, you notice something peculiar about Skagway. First, a strong wind hits you in the face (Skagway means "home of the north wind"). Then, you are confronted by reminders of the town's illustrious past. You begin to wonder what it was like living in a city of 20,000 during the world's last and greatest gold rush.

Skagway's Broadway is one of the most unique streets in all the North. Lined on both sides by boardwalk and false-front buildings, it presents a problem to tourists who have never seen a main drag that was not paved. When the wind picks up in the afternoon, the dust blows in their eyes and they decide it's too cold and too far to walk back to their cruise ship a half mile away.

So they hail a cab, one of six in town, three of which are drive by college students from North Carolina. You can pick them up in front of any of the town's 21 curio shops. They are always cruising by, peering into the stores and stopping at the one that's most crowded. Each has their own approach, their own way of hustling riders, their own line.

"Welcome to Skagway, city of broken dreams. Special deals, today only!" says one cabdriver who sits on a fire hydrant at Broadway and Third. The fire hydrants themselves are unconventional — just a pipe sticking out of the ground covered by a large yellow box that says "No Parking."

Another driver sits on a bench in front of the Igloo Bar drinking beer. When two

female crew members from the cruise ship walk past him and into the bar, he chugs the rest of his beer and says, "Skagway, where the men are men, and the women brag about it!"

If you're lucky, you'll get the one sporting the derby hat, the red vest and the pink garters around his biceps. His badge says, "Yukon Chauffeur #621," and you've heard from locals in the Igloo that he traded a bottle of genuine Carolina moonshine for it.

But when you ask him where he got it, he says he's a member of Soapy Smith's gang, the largest band of con men on the North American continent, and that you shouldn't be asking such questions unless you're willing to answer to Colonel Jefferson Randolph Smith himself.

However, if you pay that driver five bucks, he'll take you on a two-hour Skagway Hysterical Tour, pointing out what went on in the upstairs rooms of those old buildings. He'll describe what it was like being a member of that notorious band of outlaws, and what consequences he suffered at the hands of vigilante justice. He might even tell you where he got the pink garters.

Above the town, the snow-capped peaks rise 6,000 to 7,000 feet from the ocean to reflect the last bit of sunlight. One peak stands out because upon it is an inscription, the letters "AB" formed by the melting snow. The mountain was not named for the Arctic Brotherhood, a fraternal organization of men and women who went over the passes to the gold fields, but for the inscription itself. Nevertheless, for some it was a revelation, the last source of enlightenment in the "city of broken dreams."

What draws over 100,000 tourists to Skagway each year is its rough, illustrious past. During the Klondike Gold Rush of 1897-98, Skagway and rival Dyea, ten miles north, were the main stopping points for thousands of greed-stricken gold seekers on the way to the Klondike gold fields. The two cities sprang up at the heads of two trails which converged 40 miles inland at Lake Bennett and the headwaters of the Yukon River.

Each man was required by Canadian law to have a year's worth of provisions, amounting to about a ton of gear, so it was not an easy trip, especially in winter when temperatures dipped to 50 degrees below zero.

From Bennett, the stampedeers floated their supplies in homemade boats 400 miles down the river to Dawson City, where the Klondike River flows into the Yukon. The Klondike and its six tributaries were rich in gold. George Washington Carmack, who discovered gold in August 1896, described it as lying between two rocks "like cheese in a sandwich."

But most of the claims had already been staked before the boats arrived. Those who made fortunes during the gold rush were either the first discoverers or the men and women who remained in the ports to fleece the abundant transient population. Consequently, Skagway and Dyea became boom towns of 20,000 and 10,000 respectively, both boasting the best route to the Klondike.



Staff photo by Rouse Wilson

The main street of Skagway, in Southeast Alaska, looks like it hasn't changed much since the days of the gold rush. Plank sidewalks and the dirt streets are part of the style that makes Skagway a popular tourist attraction.

At first Dyea and the ancient Chilkoot Indian Trail was the most popular route. Forty-thousand persons crossed it during the winter of 1897-98 compared to about 10,000 who braved the more treacherous White Pass Trail which began in Skagway. Skagway also had a bad reputation with desperado Jefferson Randolph "Soapy" Smith running the town. There were 60 saloons, as many bordellos and gambling halls and no law.

But what kept Skagway alive then, as well as today, and what transformed Dyea into a ghost town was the construction of a railroad to Whitehorse in the Yukon, 100 miles away.

At midnight on May 28, 1898, the first tracks were laid down the middle of Broadway to the surprise and disgust of many residents. With a crew of 600 laborers working steady, the route was cut to Bennett in one year and completed to Whitehorse by the summer of 1900.

In an effort to attract people to Skagway, The White Pass and Yukon Route bought out a tramway system on the Chilkoot Trail and destroyed it. With the gold rush subsiding, Dyea quickly folded up and

moved its lumber to Skagway.

Rumors that still circulate around town today also blame the White Pass for "setting up" Soapy Smith. The town rose up against Smith on July 8, 1898, a day after one of his men used force instead of wit on an Australian miner and robbed him of \$2,000 in gold dust. Smith had always preached nonviolence to his men, but pride and a violent temper sent him to his grave. The deputy refused to give the gold back, and Smith died in a shootout on the wharf.

Skagway is expected to experience its third boom in the next five years. But this boom will not depend solely on the new road and the new pipeline. Skagway is now headquarters for a new national park.

Officially dedicated on June 4 of this year, the Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park was established "to protect and perpetuate the historical and natural values of the gold-rush trails and historic buildings relating to the Klondike Gold Rush of 1897-98," as stated in the park's master plan.

At present, a lack of federal funds and stagnant negotiations with private owners of historical buildings stand in the way of the park's progress. But according to Higgins, there should be "a noticeable surface change along Broadway in three years."

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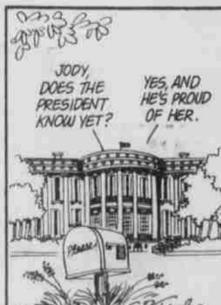
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