Gordon Skellenger Prospecting activities, summer of 1989

May 12 - I hike through half the night and nearly the whole day until I find the cabin. A squat thing with two windows and a door leaning inward on torn leather strips. But chewn and smelly. I give it a lick and a promise cleaning, catch a bit of sleep and follow the wolfpath back across the Willow Hills. This is my base camp. At 63920' by 13705', a flat piece of terrain, a rock strewn canyon, a long gulch on the westering side of Willow Hills, the stream emptying into Lake Creek. I'll be coming back up Lake Creek with a flat bottom scow, prospecting and exploring along the way.

This is dreadful country. Thick and brushy. There is only one way (for me) to get around. Walk. Flying in is no good for me. I'd still have miles to walk. Tried horses. Got thrown. The horse shied. Headed straight for the barn, too. Lake Creek is a good sized stream. With a power jet for propulsion it will be an interesting trip. At base camp I'll be within hiking range of some unusual geographic features.

May 15 - The McQuesten River empties into the Stewart here. Pitched a light camp on the bankside. Enjoying the day. I leave early tomorrow. Cook a large pot of moose leg bones. Through the day I see three grizzly bear, one moose and calf. I feast on the succulent meats and marrow. I sleep and want to dream of finding gold, but somehow I'm back in the Army again.

May 16 - Talk to two men who have a very unusual dredging sluice which they claim is what the world has been waiting for and it will clean up the bars of all the flood gold. It looks like a crackerjack thing, but we have tea and they shove the scow I've rented from David Moses into the Stewart; I catch the current racing through the channel, throttle back and let it take me on downriver. Several hours later (I have no watch) I find the main channel of take Creek, find a nice gravel bar a mile (or so) upstream and make camp. I sift a few pans with no luck. Under the stars again. I reach and they are gone; they have gone back to winter-times and only the ever increasing light fills the voidless night.

May 17 - I look over the countryside. Thick woods. Fairly flat here. High ranging hills several Kms west, Ice Chest mountain behind me. I like to dig. At the edge of where the ground slopes up I hack away the moss and dig into the gravels. I have read that the gravels here may be 200 feet. Heavy brown mass, rounded pebbles: quartz, diorite and some greenstone. The outwash of centuries. I comb through the gravels, widen my dug pit, make it ten feet; easy digging. I reach a tiny layer of stones pinhead size. I pan several scoops; shovel some more and pan some more. No color.

I fill in the pit. I'm exhausted, but I climb on up the sidehill and let two-three hours go by scanning Ice Chest Mountain with my binogulars. It is so still. A grizzly bear, all shaggy and rumpled from his winter sleep saunters by within whispering range. Glad I stood in the smoke and the wind is right and the smell of the moss and gravels is mixed good on me. Two grayling on my trot-line. The proximity to the true wild is spooking but it does not frighten me.

May 18 - Upstream through the twisting channel. I make my camp up on the bank. A little stream here. I make grouse snake, set two of them; one rabbit snare, then work my way up the little stream. I pan some of the moss and some of the gravels. I work the little stream in a steady pattern. It is kind of brushy. About 3 Kms it forks. I explore the left fork and go about 2 Kms, then back to the fork and take the righthand loop and work my way up along the ascending ground and high up in a short gulch it peters to a trickle. Not enough water to groundsluice it. Not enough time in the world to reach bedrock with a shovel. No colors.

Two grouse as nice as you please. I clean and pack in a thick ball of clay-stuff, cover with hot coals and when they have cooked enough I crack the husk and eat the steaming meat. I must not be disappointed yet. I'm looking for nuggets.

May 19 - Helicopter heard several times this morning. Off to the east. Pirate Mountain? Willow Hills. That's where I'm going. I wonder what kind of activity? If I had more money that's the way to do it. There was a lot of staking in there two or three years ago. Upstream again. Old Trail Creek. I sluice up several yards of gravel through my dredge. Nothing in the cleanup.

May 20 - Work my way up Old Trail Creek. Explore some side country, turn up some overburden and look at the underlying strata. Pan the gravels, the places where it looks like the wash might have carried some gold. All day. Make camp in the lee of a giant spruce tree. A pine bough bed. I climb to the tip of the spruce, scan the outlying countryside for anything unusual and find no rocks or outcrops to excite me.

May 21 - I follow the lefthand fork. Sift the gravels. Pan every little bar. Get nothing. I lose the little stream in the moss. The rest of the day I tramp around the hillside and work back down the fork.

May 22 - I follow a further lafthand fork on up about 5 Kms and dig around considerable along the gully sides. I make camp here.

May 23 - I've spent the day exploring the upper heights, looking, wandering, looking. Thick trees. Thick brush. A dense covering of moss everywhere. Empty heart. Large bear

Dave Grouse season does not start until September 1. track on the sand.

- May 24 Back down the fork. Easy going back down. The brush seems to be all bent in a downstream position.
- May 25 Fifteen Kms (or so) up into the headwaters of Old Trail CREEK. Rendom sampling along the creek. I drift between excitement and loss. I never sift a pan of gravel without a little heart-pounding. But I find nothing in the pan as I work upstream.
- May 26 Pick and shovel. I clean away the overburden and make wing dam for groundsluicing.
- May 27 Groundsluicing. I get a powerful run of the water and let the force of it sluice the gravels into my aluminum sluice box. No gold today. How these little stones must have churned about through the centuries. Down on the banks of the Stewart River a year ago I saw 'flat gold', but its source is a great distance. No color, only the seemingly dismal array of whites, blacks and browns and grays. A great stretch of the Stewart River has been staked. It's my opinion that a lot of 'miners' jump in before the fact!
- May 28 This is fun. Groundsluicing. I let the water do the bull-work. The stones get bigger and bigger. The water cuts a nice trench. But there is no gold. Yet.
- May 29 More groundsluicing. Cutting a great swatch in the ground. I am thankful for the trees and I make good use of them in my groundsluice to dam and then direct the water flow.
- May 30 Bostic was right when he said it was perhaps 200 feet to bedrock. I've reamed a huge cup out of this little gulch and get no gold.
- May 31 I climb out of the upper reaches of Old Trail Greek and explore the higher elevation. At about 3,500 feet the ground is barren of tree, a lush looking crop of ripening blueberries. Here the rock is exposed, laying flat and tilted, no large outcrops, but I pick and pry throughout the day. I think a man could spend a lifetime on this lonesome bald hill chipping and prying at rocks. But this is where one sees the Yukon and sees it rolling on and on and on into endless blue distance. I have to go down. I have come up with only a light pack. Getting cold. Night coming. The wind strews itself about with an awful fury and I rush to get into the shelter of the trees.
- June 1 Upstream today. Do I feel like Humphrey Bogart? The creek winds and winds and winds its way and there are many bars and banks I sample for gold. I travel better on water.

- June 2 Working upstream today. Pan out many samples. I saw 17 moosetthis morning, three in the afternoon. A 'twink-ling of fools gold'. I remembered an old black and white movie with Walter Houston (I think) laughing and goading his demented partner "It's fools gold you damn fool". A mix of granite, quartz monzonite, quartz diorite, hornblende and some feldspar; outwash from the great granite pile on Ice Chest Mountain and others. Small granite outcroppings but I've seen no gold today.
- June 3 Explore along a likely looking bench. I hack away the covering and turn the hose from my dredge on it, washing the flow through a wing-gate into my sluice. I work the day and have not seen a dimes worth.
- June 4 At the mouth of Pirate Creek today. I work the day panning some of the gravels, and get ready for a trek up the creek.
- June 5 I go into the high country today. I rigged a mount for a $l\frac{1}{2}$ HP on the dredge. Light gear. Rifle. Equipment and away we went. Got about 2 Kms, going slow, panned all likely looking sweeps, walked out to a high knoll and dug a while with pick and shovel. Nothing unusual. No gold today.
- June 6 On up Pirate Creek. Lots of panning. Lots of weary bones. Find nothing.
- June 7 Another 2 Kms further up Pirate Creek. Gold is found in quartz veins, sometimes with pyrite. Flecks of the stuff in every pan. Signs of death: huge bearpaw prints in the wet sand, moose track, a swift turning and a dash into the trees; bear in pursuit. I pan the gravel. Keep a wary eye. I dredge undereath a bank, catch the crumbling sands and gravels and sweep them into the dredge. "Let there be some gold," I say, as I start my cleanup.
- June 8 Each morning I am bright and awake with cheer. It could have been today. I moved on upstream, digging and searching. I wash maybe ten pans an hour (I didn't county). A long day. Maybe 160 pans, but I move slowly upstream, still filled with the excitement of it.
- June 9 I work my way up a sidestream. Still a trickle of water. Steep sides. Little narrow bit of water. Some deep pools. I shovel and sift. Went up about 2 Kms. A black bear shredding apart a log. I make camp.
- June 10 Scour the surrounding countryside. I lost myself in the beauty of the woods, in the quiet. I took a nap on the moss, thought I smelled wolf and was awake. Ah, it was good. Drink at the little stream of water, dig a few deeper holes and pan it like a miner should.
- dropping. Pull the dredge behind me. I'll need when I get into the headwaters. On the map it looks like a good steep

- drop out of a gulch about 2 Kms wide and then narrowing to a steep defile. Camp where a sidestream makes a righthand fork.
- June 11 I worked the righthand fork long into the night. I got no good results. Pyrite always puts a gleam in my eye. Dry camp. A marvellous spruce bough bed, a blazing bonfire. Boiled rabbit and noodles. Pan fried bread and blueberry jam. Thick boiled coffee.
- June 12 Cut overland and explore some dry ground.
- June 13 In the mainstream of Pirate Creek. Slipping on upstream. No colors.
- June 14 Pirate Creek forks here. And then it forks again. With the dredge sink several holes randomly, gauging where was the outflow, the currents. A long, long day. I've worked hard. I need results. I pushed it hard. Nothing at cleanup.
- June 15 Up the lefthand fork. No gold. Making dry camp.
- June 16 I work the righthand fork. Pan samples here and there, back and forth, but nothing. Make dry camp. Further on it forks again.
- June 17 I go back downstream. Got to get moving along. Summer is peaking.
- June 18 I've committed myself to a good exploration of Pirate Creek. With the dredge I move on upstream, sluice some small bars and work two cutbanks. Two grayling on a black gnat. Supper is good. Sleep is better.
- June 19 Explore a righthand fork for about 3 Kms. No color. My mother used to sing an Elton Britt song: "No letter today...how I've waited so long".
- June 20 Narrow gulch. Rock strewn. Took a few pans and scrabbled and picked among the rock. Ears ringing from the pounding and crushing.
- June 21 Back to the branching of the fork. Take the mainstream of Pirate Creek again. Move along. Slow. I get some hint of color. Make camp.
- June 22 Up the righthand reach. Two Kms and no gold. Wolves sounding a kill.
- June 23 I move on up, light pack. Water running slack. I dig and shovel and pan, dig and shovel and pan and when this day has wearied me out I am still joyful but emptyhanded.
- June 24 I climb into the higher elekation. I explore in

- arcs and lines and circles, but find nothing worthwhile.
- June 25 Begun the trip back downstream.
- June 28 Still about 20 Kms from the boat. I fill my rubber raft, tie the dredge to it and begin a nice fleat down.
- June 29 See two grizzly bear. They looked me over good. While the meal cooks I take a few pans. Nothing here. It's illusive stuff.
- June 30 I stepped out of the raft and sat down backwards in the creek. Tired. My legs caved in....I think from sitting so long in the raft. Bacon, powdered eggs and two pancakes. Thick coffee. Hell is where a coffee drinker runs out of coffee. I am restored.
- July 1 It's on up Lake Creek today. Good headway, good traveling; some promising exposed gravel, banks. This was flat country. Lake Creek meanders. From its appearance all the makings of a gold bearing stream. Many course and channel alterations. The gravels I pan are unchanging and utterly unyielding. Halfway today to Robbed Creek. I make camp.
- July 2 Press on, continue the systematic (or so) sampling along the exposed bars, snags, roots, trees, under the banks. No yield.
- July 3 An agonizing day. I cried in my meal. All I want is a little shithouse luck, a nugget, a piece of gold, a good sign. Sleep will restore my faith, my hope. I dreamed of walking over the mountains with a Goldspear and it kept ringing like a telephone.
- July 4 Make a good camp at the confluence of Robbed Creek. Build a wickiup, a bough bed, fire pit, lazy around most of the day and pan a couple of hours. Holy moly, get a few little colors, and a few more, but very few and faint in all and I know there's gold up here on Robbed Creek.
- July 5 With light gear I begin going up Robbed Creek. At about every one-half Km I test the gravel. A little pyrite, a color or two; always a color or two or three. About 10 Kms I make camp.
- July 6 Wenty further along Robbed Creek/ Pulling the raft behind. Flat and thick country, but a good run in the waterflow. I pan some gold at a few places; like dust in a sunbeam.
- July 7 Five Kms upstream on Robbed Creek a wide bend in the stream, signs of an old channel. Have had no gold today.
- July 8 It would take a bulldozer to get to bedrock, but I take the whole day and dig gravel and pan it. No smiles today.

- July 9 Explore the ground. I dig several (7) shallow holes and cart gravel down to the water. I pan these gravels. I fill in the holes.
- July 10 I dig ten holes ten feet apart running in an east west line opposing the digs of yesterday.
- July 11 Returned to the holes. More excavation. A dense mix of gravels. Pretty rocks and all, but of absolutely no value.
- July 12 I've filled in the holes.
- July 13 Despair overwhelms me. A despair so heavy, of such oppressiveness that I feel sunk in this wilderness. I remedied all by going fishing, return with three wonderful grayling. I feast until I swell with happiness.
- July 14 Life is good. Moving again upstream on Robbed Creek. Light pack, shovel, pick and goldpan. I mean to have a look at the headwater. Pulling the rubber raft, wearing the bottom half of my wet suit. I pan the gravels.
- July 15 Been out two months. Can't go back yet. Half-way on the trek. Move on steadily. Back in tune with the wilderness, with the universe. A nice peaceful attitude. Every unwashed pan holds the possibility. No gold today.
- July 16 Pass a good little stream entering from the left hand. I check every loop, every exposure, every possibility. One color, two colors. Somewhere off the White Mountains or Pirate Mountain the gold was washed through here.
- July 17 Reached the headwater. They are gurgling out at a pretty good rate. I rest today and make a meal of grouse. Steep country. From here Pirate Mountain rises rapidly and is covered with trees like a hermit's whiskered face. Heavy brush. I read again about Goldspear. You probe the ground and it sets off a signal, faint or loud depending on the size of the gold. When the tip touches gold it emits a signal and lights flash on the control. I must have one.
- July 18 Select my position and peel away the moss and roots. Gather the right size logs and make preparations for some groundsluicing.
- July 19 The water is scouring and pushing out the fine gravel. I work with shovel and pick, looking for bedrock. Let the water cut.
- July 20 Cut a deep hole about eight feet deep, maybe 20 feet long. Work the groundslucing, cut deeper and deeper, extending the outwash. Sampled the gravel and look for a piece that will ping.
- July 21 Continue groundsluicing.

- July 22 Spent the day on the slopes of Pirate Mountain.
- July 23 Again on Pirate Mountain. Groundsluice working, and with some help we're getting down.
- July 24 Again on Pirate Mountain. Have beat down a pretty good trail through the moss and brush and ferreted out the game trail that rise to the top. Digging, picking, searching.
- July 25 I find no exposure, no outcrops, nothing alluring, nothing prizeworthy. A great giant heap of schists, and quartzite and with an overburden of unfathomable depth on a mound of granite. I dig and probe.
- July 26 The groundsluicing has cut a great gape here. I have got no gold and got no bedrock.
- July 27 Broke camp this morning and after a walk of several Kms guiding the raft behind I get enough water to float me and the raft and we bob downstream feeling happy and worn. Harry McGinty told me he found some long-fibred asbestos (many years ago) in this region. Further up, on the other side of Pirate Mountain is a crumpled cabin. It is beyond my reach now. Was it a prospectors cabin? Was it a trappers cabin? I'll go in there once I get to my base camp. I float with the current and look for bear and moose.
- July 28 Rest and laze away the day. Had a good meal of baked rabbit, bits of wild greens, and washed back with a thick coffee. How wonderful it is to be a prospector. To be free. To be here in the wilderne ss.
- July 29 Back on Lake Creek today. The outboard with its jet pump pushing the scowboat along nicely. Travel through the day and long, long into the night. A sample now and then along the way. Prime moose ground.
- July 30 Lake Creek Winds on and on. I sampled some of the gravels on a righthand fork. No color but plenty of expectation when those pyrites glisten there. Oh, well.
- July 31 I travel on.
- August 1 Can't believe it is August. It is.
- August 2 On a righthand fork of a little stream running off Pirate Mountain I take some pans, work my way a Km or so.
- August 3 Steep, steep high ranging country. I check out another little stream. Press on, riding well on the water, a grand summer day. So good to be alive. Water flow picked up speed. In the lower reacher of a canyon, several Kms to go.

Great chunks of rock. Into another world. Stillness and echos, muffled and shouted sounds that wail like desolate winds. Alive, so filled with the sense of my courage, exploring, looking for gold; so curious. So curious about it all, about God, and about the universe. I'll find what I'm looking for here. At the head of the canyon in a little clearing about one Km from the head of the canyon is base camp. What a glorious feeling it is to be back at camp, to be 'home' again.

I wish I were allowed to describe the depravity and the torture I've gone through; flies, mosquitoes, brush and more brush, bear frights, the feeling that something will pounce any minute. But I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world. I wouldn't have it any other way.

August 4 - I left base camp and walked two days across the mountain. To sleep in ones own bed, to be safe from the nattering of insects, hot water and clean clothes. I go down to the lodge and watch the tourists, listen, hear them and the clamor is like tons of rock falling. I've taken a good rest, cut some firewood, caught up on some work around here and one night I hear the worlves again.

August 21 - On the trail again today. Camped on Airstrip Creek. Nearly dried up, the flow has ceased, but deep pools of water and it makes for good panning.

August 22 - Some of these creeks are like roadbeds. I make pretty good time today. Find a little color, just a little color. The creek forks here.

August 23 - Take the righthand fork. Pan the creekbed and shakedown the bank. I make camp on the slope of Willow Hills.

August 24 - Explored the surrounding terrain. Dense trees and thick moss.

August 25 - Swung north today and work my way along the lower slope. Plan to tackle the top of Willow Hills at 4008 feet from a different direction.

August 26 - Followed a tiny sliver of a creek about two feet wide, on up through the pass. Had no luck.

August 27 - Find some rock formations on a sidehill. Spend the day digging and heaving rock.

August 28 - Roast duck tonight. Near base camp I take two duck. Passed a string of pond lakes. Moose feeding. A bog that went for miles. Took a good bit of doing to skirt around it. Didn't pan any ground, but I sure had a good time looking around.

August 29 - I investigate the canyon.

August 30 - Further xexch search of canyon features. Basalt, a mix of felsite, pumice rounded and well-shaped running to softball size, rubble and flow from volcanic activity, some greenish looking stones. Nothing I could peg that would lead me to a good find.

August 31 - Dredged the creek today. No nuggets.

September 1 - More dredging today. Sunk three holes and had to use air tanks. No nuggets, no gold.

September 2 - Groundsearch along upper canyon rim. Dig pit to head depth along bench. Fill in hole. Trudge back with gravel samplings.

September 3 - Pit gravels divulge nothing on panning out.

September 4 - The winds changed today. Blew in a cold wind. I tramped across to the other wall of the canyon. Search of rocks.

September 5 - Another look at the far side of the canyon.

September 6 - I range out the other side of the canyon, to the east it would be and work my way up a brush strewn gulch, panning the gravels and search the terrain for unusual features.

September 7 - I walk the gulch sides back and forth, up and down, set up a triangular sort of pattern and pan the gravel from about two to three feet down. Get no results.

September 8 - Blowing a cold wind today. I stay in camp. Read Proust in the wilderness. Wolves sounding all through the night.

September 9 - Rain today.

September 10 - Cold rain today. No activity.

September 11 - First frost. Rain again.

September 12 - Warm but it has rained all day.

September 13 - Quite cool in the morning. I make a dash for Stewart Crossing.

September 14 - So thankful for the trees. Cold, cold day, Halfway yet, Snug in a spruce bough wickiup. a good fire going, oatmeal for supper. Light pack. The rest of the gear stowed until next spring.

September 15 - I come out of the brush choked pass and pick up the old Dawson stage road. Cold rain, cold soaking miserable rain. I plod om, through a great forest of white poplars then through a stand of wonderful spruce; I KUNK cut

west and come off some high bluffs about five Kms out of Stewart Crossing. Cold and shaking and nearly blind from pounding rains on my face I plunge wax waist deep into Crooked Creek and hurry on to my cabin.

Empty and drained, empty of mind and soul and hand I stand by a blazing woodfire, warmed to the cockles, thick coffee boiling on the stove, moose steaks ready to fry in an iron pan and I thank God for the wonder of it all.

Hell, I'm ready for next year. I'm loaded for bear.

Chief David Moses told me he had a dream. He was cutting a road 'back in there' and he looked down off his bulldozer at the gravels and took his pan and there was gold there and plenty of it and of good size laying in the pan.

I'd like to tray again next year.

End of summer activity.

Gordon Skellenger

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