

Harvey C. Condon Papers

MsSC 140

Biography

Although verifiable sources indicate that Harvey C. Condon was born in 1862 in Albany, Oregon, much of his life remains a mystery. Existing sources documenting his life contain conflicting information.

After spending the early years of his life in Oregon, Harvey spent the remainder of his life primarily in Washington state. According to the History of Yakima County, after Harvey attained "man's estate (he) took up ranching near Tacoma. He married Emma McTeeny, who was born in Boise City, Idaho." Oregon Geographic Names indicates Harvey practiced law in Arlington (or Alkali, as it was then known), Oregon "about 1882 and was a member of the firm of Condon and Cornish."

Sometime after 1882, the Condon family moved to Yakima, Washington. In 1897, Harvey heard about the widely reported discovery of gold in the Yukon-Alaska interior (or Klondike) and decided to join the tens of thousands of men traveling there to strike it rich. Moving his family to Seattle sometime after mid July, Harvey departed for the gold fields near the Klondike River in late November on board the steamer *Rosalie*.

After arriving in Alaska, Harvey traveled to the Klondike mining camps and towns, via the Dyea Trail, Chilkoot Pass, and the Yukon River. Once in Dawson City, he prospected for gold in the area until September of 1898, when he returned to Seattle. During his second trip to Alaska, Harvey traveled from Skagway to Dawson City, via the White Pass Trail and the Yukon River. When his Dawson City business ventures failed to produce much income, Harvey moved to Nome, Alaska, where he tried -- and failed -- to make a living selling sheep.

In 1900, Harvey gave up on his Alaska dreams and returned to Seattle. The Condon family moved back to Yakima in 1903. Between 1903 and 1907, Harvey worked as a bookkeeper for the Coffin Brothers Wholesale Groceries and Produce, which was owned in part by his brother-in-law Arthur Coffin. In 1907 (1908), the Condon family left Yakima for Vaughn, Washington, where Harvey C. Condon died at the age of 69 in June of 1931.

Scope & Contents

The Harvey C. Condon Papers have been organized into four record series: Correspondence, 12/31/91 - 5/4/10, Diary and Transcript, Photographs, and Miscellaneous Items.

The letters, written to his wife, Emma, during the Klondike Gold Rush offer a unique contribution to the understanding of life in this area between 1897 and 1900. Although the original letters themselves are often difficult to read, the written transcripts aid in their use. Several of the letters are incomplete and some have been lost. After arriving in Alaska, Harvey began writing fairly descriptive letters to his wife during two separate trips into the Alaska - Yukon interior. Harvey's descriptions of life and work in this area during his first trip (Dyea to Dawson, via Chilkoot Pass) and during his second trip (Skagway to Dawson to Nome, via White Pass Trail) contain many descriptions of life on the trail and in various towns and encampments during this tumultuous time.

The original diary written by Harvey during his travels, though difficult to read in places, supplements some of the information provided in many of the letters and is worth checking when the letters leave unanswered questions. However, many of the entries are short and contain little more than work

schedules and weather reports. The transcript of the diary, created by one of Harvey's relatives in the 1960s, does make the diary more accessible.

The photographs provide a small amount of supplementary information. There is one photograph of several men with horses and dogs on a boat in Alaska. There is also a photograph of a house, reputed to be H.C. Condon's house in Walla Walla. And there are twenty-five postcards and greeting cards from various places around the Northwestern United States and Canada.

The miscellaneous items consist primarily of a tax receipt and a contract written by H.C. Condon.

Inclusive Dates: 1872-1964, bulk 1897 - 1900.

Restrictions: None

Volume: .5 linear foot.

Accession Number: 1984.85.

Record Series I: Correspondence, 12/1/1891 - 5/4/1910.

Box 1

Folder:

- 1. Correspondence: 12/31/1891 - 7/29/1892:** A letter from Harvey to Emma written on New Year's Eve, 1891 and a letter to Harvey from a bank official in Portland, Oregon.

- 2. Correspondence: 10/19/1897 - 12/25/1897:** Seven letters describing Harvey's first journey to Alaska as a gold prospector.

Harvey departed from Seattle on board the *Rosalie*, a transformed sailing vessel and mail boat. Harvey and his partner, Jim Crittenden, traveled to Alaska in the crowded steerage area of the *Rosalie* during late November and early December of 1897, or about four months after the steamer *Portland* arrived in Seattle with the first load of gold-enriched prospectors. The sensation surrounding the arrival of the *Portland* created the stampede of would-be prospectors from the lower 48 states. After departing Seattle, the heavily loaded *Rosalie* called at the following ports during its nine day journey to the town of Dyea: Tacoma, Port Townsend, Victoria, Metlakatta, Mary's Island, Fort Simpson, Fort Wrangell, Juneau, and Skagway. Also worthy of note: according to Harvey, the cable for the well-known Dyea Pass Tramway traveled to Dyea on board the *Rosalie*. The tramway was under construction during Harvey's crossing of Chilkoot Pass.

The letters also detail the important decisions that were made by Harvey and Jim after arriving in the Skagway and Dyea area. For example, Harvey and Jim decided to take the Dyea Trail after discussing the issue with other more experienced prospectors in Skagway. After arriving in Dyea, Harvey and his partner also participated in the well-documented and problematic method of unloading supplies from the many ships calling at Dyea: their gear was placed on a scow and run into shore at high tide. Following the organization of their gear, Harvey and Jim began the arduous process of transporting their supplies up the Dyea Trail, along the Taiya River, through the large temporary encampments of Canyon City, Camp Pleasant, and Sheep Camp. The letters also detail the many hazards of life on the trail.

- 3. Correspondence: 1/1/1898 - 3/26/1898:** Twenty-three letters from Harvey to Emma describing his mid-winter trek up the Dyea Trail, over Chilkoot Pass, and the first part of his decent down the string of lakes comprising the headwaters of the Yukon River.

Several of the letters continue the story of their difficult ascent to Chilkoot Pass, paying special attention to the time they spent at Stone House, which was near the scales manned by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and one of the last places to camp below the Dyea side of the pass. They also contain many observations of life on the trail, including several graphic descriptions of its many horrors, such as the abuse and death of thousands of pack animals at the hands of their inexperienced and greedy masters.

The February 11th letter from Lake Lindeman provides a detailed account of the high adventure surrounding the crossing of Chilkoot Pass. Powerful storms raked the mountain during Harvey and Jim's passage, causing great difficulty in moving camp from Stone House to the summit and down to Long Lake. Furthermore, additional trips were required to bring down two years of supplies from the top of the pass.

The last several letters describe conditions at Harvey's Lake Bennett campsite and contain accounts of conditions along both the Dyea and White Pass Trails, which were now clogged with tens of thousands of gold rushers. During this time, thousands of men were encamped around Lake Bennett awaiting the spring thaw. These men spent the late winter and early Spring building boats for the trip down the Yukon River to Dawson City. Harvey's letters also reflect the thoughts of a lonelier man, since he and Jim Crittenden split up soon after crossing Chilkoot Pass. After hearing rumors of a big gold strike in the Salmon River area, Harvey decided against whipsawing lumber for wages on Lake Bennett and for traveling to the gold fields to seek his fortune. In late March, Harvey purchased half interest in a mule with a man named J.R. Montgomery and began the trip to Dawson City.

4. **Correspondence: 4/1/98 - 8/30/1898:** Eight letters from Harvey to Emma concluding his account of his first journey to the Klondike gold fields. These letters, in addition to several entries in the diary, also detail how Harvey returned to Seattle.

The first several letters pick up the story of Harvey's journey down the lakes toward Dawson City. These letters describe conditions at various campsites along the way, such as Tagish Station, Caribou Crossing, Lake Laberge, and near the Hootalinqua (Teslin) River. Many men took this route down to Dawson, as opposed to waiting for the spring thaw and boating down river. One letter describes how the men passed White Horse Rapids, one of the more dangerous stretches of water in the Yukon River watershed.

At Lake Laberge, the men built a raft, which they rode down to a location near the junction of the Hootalinqua and Thirty Mile Rivers. At this point, however, the men had to stop, since the river was still frozen and too low to proceed. The men also passed many wrecked rafts, including several with men still clinging to their shattered remains.

Another letter gives a good description of Harvey's six day journey from the Hootalinqua campsite to Dawson City. Also worth noting: Harvey mentions that he arrived in Dawson on the same day (May 17, 1898) as Major J.M. Walsh, the new Commissioner of the Yukon, who arrived at the head of a thirteen boat flotilla. Essentially, Walsh had been assigned the difficult task of bringing order to the chaos of the gold rush.

After spending several days camped in Klondike (Lousetown) and Dawson Cities, Harvey sold the mule and began a nine day hike into the Klondike gold fields. Although Harvey's claim near the famous Discovery claims yielded about \$15.00 to \$20.00 of gold a day, he eventually decided to prospect around the headwaters of the McQuesten River. This arduous trip is well documented in two long letters.

Harvey's letters also give several dramatic descriptions of living conditions in Dawson as tens of thousands of disillusioned prospectors began the painful process of giving up on their get-rich-quick schemes and began seeking wage work in a tremendously overcrowded labor market. Harvey also planned his return to Seattle during this time, while thinking about his future business plans in the Yukon.

Note: although the letters for this portion of Harvey's time in the Yukon end here, his diary describes most of his return to Seattle via St. Michael, Alaska. Essentially, after selling the balance of his supplies on September 11th, Harvey departed Dawson on board the steamer *May West* the following day.

5. **Correspondence: 12/17/98 - 9/10/99:** Eighteen letters describing Harvey's second trip to Alaska. Note: Harvey's diary also contains a fragmentary description of this second trip.

On December 14, 1898, Harvey departed Seattle for Skagway on board the steamer *Farallon*. The first several letters describe Harvey's arrival in Skagway, his preparations to travel inland on the White Pass Trail, and his arduous ascent to the pass. Although the horse Harvey used to haul his gear helped in his ascent, the items Harvey bought for sale in the Yukon added to the difficulty of the climb. Harvey provides several accounts of his passage over the White Pass Trail, which by that time was also a toll road, used by packers as well as people hauling supplies in wagons. A portion of the railroad had also been built part way to the summit. In addition to the fare Harvey had to pay, no matter which method he used to cross the pass, he also had to contend with the difficult terrain and weather conditions at that time of year. He also gives a detailed description of his labor-filled daily routine, as well as accounts of the deaths of several men on the trail during his ascent.

The next several letters describe Harvey's descent from White Pass and his journey along the lakes and the Yukon River toward Dawson. These letters are filled with many detailed descriptions of life on the trail and Harvey's assessments of his business prospects as he draws nearer to Dawson. He also records many small pieces of news given to him by the various travelers he encounters along the trail.

The remaining letters describe conditions in Dawson and Harvey's efforts to make a living, either as a wage laborer or as a prospector. Early during his return to Dawson, he sold all of the items he brought along for profitable sale. However, he did not realize much profit, since prices had fallen due to oversupply. Harvey also located a friend named George McConkey and, together, they began competing for wage work among the thousands of other job-seeking men. They also tried their luck for over a month at a claim along the Indian River. The claim did not pay and they were forced to again seek wage work. In early September, George returned to Seattle because of illness and Harvey decided to try his luck in Nome, Alaska, which had become another destination rumored by many as a place to get rich quick.

6. **Correspondence: 6/21/1900 - 9/17/1900:** Ten letters covering Harvey's time in Nome, Alaska. These letters also document Harvey's reluctant decision to cut his losses and return to Seattle.

Note: Even though the letters appear to offer a continuous narrative, there is a long gap in the correspondence. Approximately nine months passed between his departure from Dawson for Nome and his arrival there with several hundred sheep. None of the letters describe his decision to sell sheep in Nome. Since he discusses several early Spring letters from Emma, it may be assumed that he was in Alaska during this time. However, the correspondence from this time appears to have been lost. Also, the diary ends before Harvey travels to Nome.

After arriving in Nome with over a hundred sheep, Harvey began his sales efforts, which were hampered by the arrival, several days after he arrived, of over a thousand sheep, along with many cattle and hogs. According to one of the letters, Harvey bought the sheep in partnership with Arthur, his brother-in-law. When the sheep business began to fail, Arthur urged Harvey to cut his losses and return home. Although Harvey eventually sold all the sheep for a small profit, he made a last effort to find profitable wage work before giving up and returning to Seattle. In one of his last letters from Alaska, he discusses returning to Yakima upon his arrival in the lower 48 states.

7. **Correspondence: 4/02/1901 - 5/4/1901:** Several letters to and from Harvey after he returned from Alaska and began working with Arthur Coffin and the Coffin Brothers Department Stores.

Record Series II: Diary and Transcript.

Folder:

8. **Diary and Transcript:** The original diary Harvey Condon kept during his two trips to Alaska during the Klondike Gold Rush and transcript. Connie Condon, a relative, apparently typed a rough transcript of this diary. There is a 1964 letter of inquiry from the *Alaska Sportsman* and a copy of a photograph removed from the diary. Also, a duty paid receipt from the Northwest Mounted Police during Harvey's second trip into the Yukon using the White Pass Trail.

Record Series III: Photographs.

Folder:

9. **Photographs (Diary):** One photograph removed from Harvey's diary. The photo shows several men, horses, and dogs on a boat in Alaska.
10. **Photographs (Condon's House, Walla Walla, Washington, 1872):** One photograph of a house with the following written on the back: "Condon's house on 3rd street, (indecipherable), Walla Walla, 1872."
11. **Photographs (Postcards and Greeting Cards):** Twenty-five postcards and greeting cards from various places around the Northwestern United States and Canada.

Record Series IV: Miscellaneous Items.

Folder:

12. **Miscellaneous Items:** A Yakima County Tax Receipt for 1907, the lyrics to the song "Some Day I'll Wander Back Again," what appears to be a wedding card for Emma McIteeny, and an October 1897 contract (an original handwritten contract and a typed transcript) between E.M. Condon and Gustof Nelson, selling his interest in several mines in Kittitas County, Washington. H.C. Condon served as E.M. Condon's attorney.