

The Statewide Committee for Research honors Alaska's

Northern Innovators



Clarence Berry The Stampeder

Northern Innovators Hall of Fame Member

Clarence Berry, a gold chaser with a mind as restless as his body, made his way north from California fruit country in the 1890s. When he reached the town where the Fortymile River meets the Yukon, Berry freed himself of his net worth.

“Arrived at Forty Mile the latter part of June with three dollars and sixty cents in my pocket,” he wrote in his diary. “I decided I would play a joke to get acquainted, so proceeded to the first saloon. Some 20 men were there and I invited all of them to have a drink. After we had all finished our drink, I said to the proprietor, ‘I don’t know what you charge for drinks but here is all I have,’ and placed on the counter my three dollars and sixty cents. Frank Bowker, the proprietor, luckily a good-natured Englishman, thought that a good joke and said: ‘Boys, have a drink on the house.’”

From that fearless introduction to the north in 1894, Clarence Berry became one of the success stories of northern Gold Rush history. Not only would he leave the territory of Alaska as one of the richest men alive, he left behind inventions that made cold-country mining more efficient. His ideas helped push Alaska into its gold boom, which brought into existence Anchorage, Juneau and Fairbanks.

After word of the big strike pulled Berry deeper into Canada from the Fortymile country to Eldorado Creek, which flows into the Klondike River, Berry staked several claims near the original. Like the other pick-and-shovel miners, Berry and his partners made wood fires to soften the ground, which was frozen beneath the surface even when the air above was 80 degrees. Each fire thawed the ground another foot or so, allowing Berry to dig shafts straight down.

When Berry sunk a hole 12 feet deep on Eldorado, he found riches that became known around the world.

“I could see gold in the gravel I had shoveled out of the shaft,” Berry wrote. “Then came the excitement and we built another fire to see what was deeper. That night I made a windlass and went to bed, but don’t think I slept a wink.”

On that claim — No. 5 Eldorado Creek — Berry and his partners, which included his wife Ethel, in eight months dug out more than \$1 million in gold.

That fall, escaping the country on a steamship via the Yukon River and St. Michael, Alaska, the Berrys returned to Seattle with a boatload of Klondike miners lugging sacks full of gold. A newspaper reporter, underestimating by half the hefty cargo, wrote about “a ton of gold” aboard. The great rush was on.

The next summer, Berry returned north with labor-saving equipment his riches provided. Working Eldorado Creek in spring of 1898, Berry noticed that steam spewing from a hoisting engine’s exhaust hose had thawed the frozen ground beneath it. There, an idea was born.

Berry pounded the barrel from a dismantled rifle into the soil. He fired a boiler with kindling and attached a hose from its belly to the rifle barrel. After he forced steam into the ground, the soil thawed in minutes, compared to the hours it took a surface fire of spruce and willow. Berry refined the design of the steam point, which resembled a spear with a pointed and blunt end (to be pounded by a hammer). Workers drove the points as deep as they could in an overlapping thaw pattern. They steamed, drove the points again, and steamed some more. Berry’s invention has softened hundreds of square miles of Alaska river bottom.

Though the equipment has evolved, some miners and engineers still employ Berry’s steam-thawing method. Contractors living in the discontinuous permafrost region of Interior Alaska steamed ice-

rich gravels beneath the Fairbanks Main Post Office near the airport in 1979 and the Big Dipper Ice Arena in 1981. The thawing released frozen water, which allowed soils to settle before contractors built on top of them.

Berry also imported other’s inventions that changed Alaska’s complexion. Following his good fortune in the Klondike, Berry, his wife and his brother Fred moved their outfit eastward, working the ground near the present site of Ester, west of Fairbanks. There, and on Mammoth Creek claims just off today’s Steese Highway near Eagle Summit, Berry introduced to Alaska hydraulic mining (in which gravity-fed water blasts from a firehose-like nozzle, allowing miners to strip off duff and soils that smother gold-bearing gravels and bedrock). Another device he brought from Canada was the enormous floating dredge, which ate into gravels with a moving bucket line.

A different kind of prospector, Barry was unlike many others who hit it rich in the Klondike and burned through their dollars shortly afterward. Instead, he returned home to Selma, California, and invested in real estate he hoped was underlain by oil. In Taft, California, he struck paydirt a fourth time (following Eldorado, Ester and Mammoth creeks), forming the Berry Petroleum Company, which produced more than 100 million barrels of oil from beneath the San Joaquin Valley.

Berry died in 1930 of appendicitis. He was 63. The accounts of his life often include the theme of his bigheartedness; a century-old legend has it that he placed both a tin of gold dust and a bottle of whiskey outside his Eldorado Creek cabin for passersby in need. More substantiated is the report of him funding a pension for the bartender who had given him a job in Forty Mile during Berry’s lean early years.