

Golden Dreams of the Great White North

Years ago, my grandma blessed me with a cache of ancient sepia photographs, cardboard-backed, studio shots. She wrote some things on those old pix because, Lord knows, she knew some day neither me nor anyone else on the face of the earth would have a clue who those old-timers are or were.

One of them, I'm not sure she knew. One name is scribbled on the back, above the word "clondykens" with a c, not a k. "Walt Sprengers" it says, and then "clondykens." She told me the bunch was a foursome of local toughs who'd decided to pack weapons--in the studio shot they wear them promiscuously--and head up to the Yukon looking to strike it rich.

Their brash eagerness reeks with yahoo dreams: locals wanting to be desperadoes. It was 1896. They wanted to be either rich or the next hero of hot dime novel.

And they weren't alone. Two little gold strikes in eastern states—Carolina (1799) and Georgia (1828) had come first to this new muscular nation. Twenty years later in 1849, the motherload came through—California. Sutters Mill, a huge discovery that forever altered a nation not yet a century old. Hundreds of thousands went west on a gold rush. Just about as many returned. "Go-backers," people called them.

And then came Colorado, a decade later, "Pike's Peak or Bust" scribbled over the sides of streams of covered wagons. So many seekers the most read newspaper in America was the *Rocky Mountain News*. Even though "gold fever" was no virus, it nearly wiped out the Kiowa, the Cheyenne, the Lakota, and the Ute, not to mention the buffalo, prairie grasses, and woods.

In 1874, it was South Dakota's Black Hills. On an expedition, George Armstrong Custer snuck in a geologist or two who just happened to find some gold near a town now named after the America's favorite military general. When that source was depleted, people looked elsewhere, farther north, Lead and Deadwood.

Those hombres in Grandma's old photograph, the "clondykers" — instead of k -- were about to take on the most impossible pilgrimage of all, through land inaccessible except on foot—and, thanks to mountains of snow and ice, that was itself nearly impossible. Not a horse, not even a mule could make the trip. The only way to get to Yukon gold fields was to lug everything—and you needed a ton of stuff to survive—lug everything by yourself. Thousands didn't. Some died, most quit and came back with nothing but a dozen harrowing stories.

The klondykers in my grandma's old cardboard portrait were seeking their fortunes, American style, blowing the hometown pop stand for real son-of-a-gun adventure. No more drug-store sarsaparilla, just good, hard rotgut.

But I shouldn't turn them into cartoons.

These four hooligans are a quintessential American story. "We been dreamin'. We're tough enough to make it come true in them mountains. We got each other, and we got our hardware, and we're going to get some of whatever can be got and maybe even come back rich. Shoot, yes."

It's as dumb as it is wonderful, the siren call of the wild, unsettled West, getting way out beyond the open spaces where a man--a white man--can still be a man or die trying.

I can't help thinking they knew, boom or bust, they were characters in a story

much bigger than they were. Maybe that's why they wanted the picture taken-
-this one, on cardboard, the one I found last week in an old White Owl cigar
box buried in the bottom of a trunk I hadn't opened for years.