

Madam Tremblay: a story of romance and courage



Photo by Photo Submitted

A HISTORIC FIGURE – Madame Tremblay is seen on Miller Creek, 1895. She likely shaved her hair because the cabins in those days were infested with lice. Near the door, note the large-size gold pan, made for men with strong backs; also, the wooden boxes by the door, likely used to classify gold-bearing gravels. Yukon Archives photo #82/3 h-154, V. Wilson Collection

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By **freelancer** on **January 10, 2020**

A young French Canadian woman hummed softly to herself as she prepared the evening meal in her mother's kitchen. Her mama's voice broke into Emilie Fortin's thoughts:

"Emilie! We have a guest coming for supper. From the North— Alaska, I think."

"Okay, mama. I'll make a little extra."

"Better make plenty extra," said her mother's voice again.

"He's a very big man. Rough, too. You saw him back home in Quebec some years ago; you were only a child then.

"He left to go adventuring and is here only for a short visit. His name is Pierre-Nolasque Tremblay."

The family gathered 'round the big table. As the food was being trundled from the kitchen to the dining room, their guest arrived.

Now the females of the household stopped their chatter as they went about their work, and cast sly glances at the stranger.

Even Mrs. Fortin could find nothing to say. For this young man, though he'd left Quebec as an innocent young lumberjack, had returned as something else: something wild, raw—but confident.

It was as if he had brought the very spirit of that far-off land with him.

He sat down to eat, silent as the rest. His eyes followed the full figure of Emilie Fortin as she carried food from the kitchen and cleared the table after each course.

When she sat down, he stared unashamedly at her pretty, dark-skinned features and she stared back with mischievous brown eyes.

A message as old as time flashed between them in a silent rhythm... When they finished the meal, the family asked this Nolasque Tremblay to recount some of his adventures.

He stood up, taking a small leather pouch from his vest pocket, loosening the top tie and then turned it upside down.

A stream of gold nuggets clattered loudly onto the hard surface of the table, and sharp intakes of breath made the only other sound.

They gaped at the gleaming treasure spread out before them. Everyone knew, though they had never seen it before, that this had to be gold.

Not taking their eyes off it, they waited for the tall young Frenchman to speak.

Nolasque Tremblay, known as Jack Tremblay in the Yukon, had left his native province of Quebec at the age of 21. He eventually wandered west and then north into the valley of the Yukon River, arriving in that unknown land in 1886.

He fit right into the lifestyle there and soon gained a reputation as a true follower of the Code of the North.

Ever ready to help a friend, generous, honest, physically tough—these were the traits of the white men wandering up and down the creeks and rivers of Alaska and the Yukon. All of them, including Jack, were looking for gold.

At this time, the world was in the grip of economic recession, so \$1,000 constituted a sizable fortune. Anyhow, it was only by chance that he wandered into Cohoes, New York, where he met his future bride. By now, he was 33 years old.

He quickly proposed to Emilie Fortin, then 22, and she accepted.

She knew she married both him and the land he talked about constantly, with so many a wave of his arm to the North.

So, into the very heart of this unmapped, savage frontier, Emilie Tremblay accompanied her husband in the spring of 1894.

Leaving all her skeptical, perhaps envious friends and her tearful mother, Emilie left with Jack on the great adventure.

Across the continent by train to Vancouver, then by ship to Juneau, Alaska went Jack and Emilie, arriving there on March 30th.

They hired a small boat to take them up the Lynn Canal to Wilson Post. From there, they walked along the Dyea trail to the foot of the not-yet-famous Chilkoot Pass. Three wild-looking Chilkat Indian packers carried most of the gear.

The Tremblays didn't run into all the troubles that terrorized the greenhorns who came in later during the Gold Rush, but they did have some exciting moments.

A few miles from Wilson Post, Jack turned back to retrieve some forgotten items, leaving his wife alone in the tent except for two dogs.

A mountain blizzard blew in and Emilie awoke to find herself unable to move. She was completely covered with heavy, wet snow.

She managed to free one arm and cut a hole in the side of the tent.

The dogs freed themselves and went out through the opening.

Their excited barking woke up the members of another travelling party who came over and shovelled Emilie out of her predicament.

Then they climbed the snow-covered Chilkoot Pass and slid on their backsides down the other side to the edge of Crater Lake.

The following day, they reached Lake Bennett and camped there for several weeks while Jack and his men built two boats. At last, the ice broke up and they set out.

They floated across a chain of lakes and short rivers until they came to the dreaded Miles Canyon and Whitehorse Rapids. Here, Emilie got out and walked along the cliffs above the river while Jack and the others shot through the rapids with the boats.

They ate fish, greasy bear meat, porcupine, sea gull eggs, berries— whatever the land provided.

Emilie cooked with their meagre utensils, and at night they slept in a small tent on shore.

At the time, she didn't fully realize the dangers of this 700-mile journey because her husband Jack was so well-versed in the hazards of wilderness travel.

For the newlyweds, the whole trip was a delightful experience. In later years, Emilie recalled her feelings:

“This first trip down the Yukon River remains in my memory full of romance, joy, and love. There was nothing like it in all the world.”

At Fort Selkirk, a native came upon Emilie sitting alone while her husband talked to the trader. The Indian sold her a fish then stayed by, staring at her wondrously

Jack came back and spoke to him in “Chinook.” (Chinook was the universal language of the North, being a mixture of French, English and native languages—about 300 words in all.) The Indian wanted to know if Emilie was “Jack’s little girl.”

“No,” said Jack. “She is my little wife.”

They passed the mouth of the Klondike River—as yet only a landmark letting them know they had 50 miles to go.

No one in the party could have envisioned the wild town that would spring up on that spot just two years later. The Tremblays arrived at Fortymile on June 16, 1894.

The town had a few saloons. A preacher and his wife lived there, and the rest of the inhabitants were eccentric bachelors or else they “lived in sin” with Indian women.

Some of these ladies were greatly curious to see young Emilie, one of the first white women in that part of the country. She spoke of it in later years:

“Although they were friendly enough, I was apprehensive, for they would touch me on the back, pull at my long skirt, and murmur among themselves. The next day they came again to admire me; they wouldn’t sit down but stared curiously as if I were a caged animal.”

This story was originally published in the Yukoner Magazine. The Star is publishing some of its past works on Fridays. The second and final part of this story will be published next Friday.

By Sam Holloway