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A HISTORIC FIGURE – Madame Tremblay (left) is seen at a cabin on Bonanza Creek. Photo courtesy Yukon Archives

## Madam Tremblay: a story of romance and courage

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By **Whitehorse Star** on **January 17, 2020**

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Along with a couple of other miners and some native packers, Emilie and Jack Tremblay left for Miller Creek.

They poled a boat up the Fortymile River as far as Moose Creek and from there, they walked over the divide, down into the valley of Miller Creek.

The whole trip was some 60 miles. Through swamp and muskeg, over cold mountain trails above the tree-line, and through fire-killed timber areas—where every step meant climbing over a fallen, char-black tree trunk—Emilie plodded along in her long skirts.

Clouds of mosquitoes hovered constantly about their heads. At one point, they became so thirsty they drank muddy water from a sink-hole pushed in by Emilie's foot.

At last they came to the cabin—the home she had travelled 5,000 miles to see.

At that moment, she could have turned and gone back over the tortuous trail; for she did not like what she saw: “It was just a log cabin with a sod roof and a small aperture in one of the walls. And Jack said, ‘Emilie, there is your home.’”

“We went in. There was only one room with a pole in the middle supporting the roof. Bottles filtered the light through the little window. The floor was part log and part dirt and the cabin was repulsively dirty. The foot of the centre pole was covered with a layer, deep and black. It was the miner’s spittoon, Emilie’s husband explained: “You see, Emilie, when the miners are lying down on their bunks, tired and exhausted after the day’s work, they don’t take the trouble to get up and spit. They aim at the pole where they know they will not hit anyone.”

Somehow Emilie cleaned up the cabin. Jack Tremblay felt himself to be the most fortunate man in all the Yukon; and every miner in the district came to admire his wife. Many of them predicted she would never stay.

But Jack and Emilie were very much in love. They teased each other gaily and ate their meals by candlelight, while outside the cabin the endless wilderness stretched out all around them. But still, it must have been a lonely time for the young bride. As yet she spoke only French and so could talk to anyone but Jack.

In the spring of 1895, however, a Mr. and Mrs. Day and their children moved into the valley. Emilie visited them often and began to learn a bit of English.

By the end of that summer, Jack had mined enough gold to take them “Outside” for a holiday. And a good thing it was that they were leaving.

Their supplies had run so low by summer’s end that they were eating beans three times a day.

On this trip, they boarded a small sternwheeler which took them down the Yukon River to St. Michael, Alaska.

From there, a ship took them to Vancouver, where they boarded a train for the East. Emilie, so happy to see her family again, had many stories to tell them.

The Tremblays did not come back to the Yukon until the spring of 1898.

Emilie’s mother, who had always opposed her daughter’s desire to return to the Yukon, died suddenly, and the couple made plans to head north again. But now things would go differently, because in 1898, the Klondike Gold Rush had reached its most feverish stage.

As Jack and Emilie came over the mountain passes again, they witnessed the terrible snowslide that killed 74 people.

Emilie’s cousin, travelling with them, died at Lake Bennett, and two other relatives became very sick. Such was the Trail of ’98.

It had been much easier the first time, when they had the whole route to themselves. Now it was clogged with thousands of goldseekers, all frantic to reach Dawson City.

Using their wilderness experience, the Tremblays reached the Klondike without mishap; but like everyone else, they were too late to stake a rich claim.

All the dry goods they had brought in to sell turned out to be almost worthless; thousands of disillusioned stampedeers were selling their outfits for next to nothing.

And their Miller Creek property had been considered abandoned and taken over by others.

For the next 15 years, Jack Tremblay worked for wages on the rich creeks around Dawson.

When he had the time and money, he prospected for gold, but never did find a good spot.

He later bought some claims on Bonanza Creek and mined there for several years, barely making expenses.

In 1906, he hit a rich pocket, one the previous owners had missed, and that year he and Emilie went on a trip to Europe.

They travelled first-class, and in France, they stayed with a wealthy Klondiker who had bought a huge castle with his gold. The Tremblays even visited the Pope in Rome.

On her return, Madame Tremblay, as folks called her now, was to say she preferred the miners of Dawson to the high society of Europe.

In 1913, she opened her famous shop in the downstairs of their home at the corner of Third and King Street in Dawson. The building and her sign are still there, now restored to original condition by Parks Canada.

She ran the store for 30 years. Contrary to legend, she brought only one shipment of gowns and exotic perfumes from Paris; after that, the store mainly carried ladies' wear and novelties.

Jack Tremblay died in 1935, having earned the title of Grand Old Man of the Yukon.

Madame Tremblay took part in many social activities in Dawson.

She formed the society of the Ladies of the Golden North; was a member of the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire; and in 1937, she received a commemorative medal of the coronation of King George VI.

In 1940, she married another miner, Louis Lagrois. She closed her store and with her new husband lived in a cabin at the junction of Bonanza and Eldorado Creeks (Grand Forks).

When Emilie turned 75 and Louis 80, they moved to a boarding house in Victoria. She died of cancer in 1949, and Louis passed away in 1956.

Madame Tremblay had let it be known that she was the first white woman to cross the Chilkoot Pass, and she became widely celebrated for this.

However, a Mrs. Beaumont crossed the Pass in 1892 and went on to Fortymile.

Before that, “sporting women,” as they were called, came in over the same route on their way to the new mining camps.

But it can be said that Madame Tremblay was one of the first white women to settle in the Yukon. She was greatly loved by the miners, and performed many good works in her life, especially for the sick.

Only age and poor health could have induced her to leave her adopted land.

In Whitehorse, they’ve named a school after her, and of course her old store in Dawson is now a tourist attraction.

Her story is one of romance and courage and a kind of downright goodness; and she lived a rich, interesting life here in the Yukon.

**By Sam Holloway**