William Barraclough
This article concerns John Charles McGregor. Over the years, Nanaimo has produced many outstanding citizens, yet little has been published of their achievements. So I think it is only right and proper to relate one of the many exploits of Mr. John Charles McGregor, a man who contributed much to sport and the welfare of Nanaimo in general.

First, a brief history relative to his family and events that preceded his famous walk out of the Klondike.

Grandfather John McGregor came from Ayrshire, Scotland, in the ship Harpooner to Victoria in 1849. After short periods at Fort Rupert and Metchosin, the family settled at Nanaimo in 1852.

Father, William McGregor, was a native son of Vancouver Island. Mother, Amanda, born at Nanaimo, was a sister of John Meakin, who arrived here as a young boy with his parents: Mr. and Mrs. John Meakin, November 27th, 1854. They were passengers on the Princess Royal's historic journey.

John Charles McGregor, better known as JC, was born at Nanaimo on the 6th day of May, 1875. He received his education at the public school on Crace Street, Nanaimo. He entered high school at the age thirteen, attended there for five years, then taught school here for four years.

The gold rush calling JC, together with his cousin, Arthur McGregor, Richard Gibson, and William Grey, set out for the Klondike. The party of four left Nanaimo, July the 2nd, 1897. Sailed from Victoria on the steamship Queen on the 23rd, landing at Skagway, Alaska, July the 26th. They climbed the famous Chilkoot Pass, and arrived at Dawson City, September 17th, 1897.

While in the Klondike, hearing of his father's death from severe burns at Number 1 Mine, he left for the outside and his home at Nanaimo. This account, selected from his diary, concerns his famous trip from Dawson City to Skagway. He travelled over 600 miles, mushing behind a dog team in sub-zero weather. A feat of endurance and fortitude.

Mr. McGregor, presented an address on the subject before Nanaimo Historical Society, October the 29th, 1958. This is William Barraclough speaking, for tape recording, July the 22nd, 1968. And now to the story from Mr. McGregor's diary.

Quoting:

I left Eldorado Creek February the 2nd, 1899, and walked to Dawson City to prepare for the trip out over the ice, up the Yukon River. While in Dawson, I met a detective from Chicago, who was
very anxious to travel with me. He being a big, active man, I was only too pleased to have his company on the long trip out.

The next day was spent in securing a robe, dogs, sleigh, and suitable food for the journey. When it became known that I was leaving for the outside, I was approached by the post office officials and asked if I could deliver a small parcel of government mail within 21 days to Skagway. The reward agreed upon was $100. This contract caused me to walk an extra 60 miles, as I will relate later.

Securing two dogs, a sleigh, a sleeping robe, and some feed for ourselves and the dogs, also the mail sack, we walked onto the Yukon River, February the 3rd, 1899. And started for Skagway, 600 miles away. The temperature was 52 degrees below zero. Before leaving, we had received from the Mounted Police a list of roadhouses, giving the distances apart, along the Yukon. These we decided to try and make each night, irrespective of distances.

On our first day, we made 40 miles easily. On the second day, we pulled up at a roadhouse 30 miles further on the way. When I discovered the mail sack had been left at the last stopping place. There was nothing to do but go back for it. Borrowing two dogs and a sleigh, I started back at about 4:30 p.m. I told my partner to proceed to the next roadhouse the next morning, which was 20 miles away, and I would overtake him that night.

My trip back was a most harrowing one. A band of wolves followed me for at least 10 miles, but always staying just out of sight in the bush and timber on the river bank. Needless to say, this spurred the dogs and myself on. I covered the 30 miles in about four and a half hours. I arrived back at the roadhouse about 10:30 p.m., and had something to eat. Then rolled up in a robe and slept until 6 a.m. Taking breakfast, I started to catch up with my partner. Reaching the roadhouse, I had travelled 110 miles during the last 36 hours, and all this time, the temperature was 50 degrees below zero.

One does not ride on the sleigh, which is securely attached to the body in case of the dogs getting away. The only riding one does is if getting warm from running, is to step on the sleigh for a minute or so to cool off! One must not become warm enough to perspire.

We were now 90 miles out from Dawson, starting on the fourth day's travelling. Our next roadhouse was 40 miles away, situated at the mouth of Stewart River. We arrived there very tired after 12 hours of travel. After a good night's rest, we were away early in the morning.

We made 35 miles this fifth day out. The travelling had been very hard, as on occasions we had to leave the river and travel in the woods, on the banks of the river, owing to open water in places.

07:27

The open river appeared as boiling, as clouds of vapour rose high owing to temperature of the water being so much warmer than the air, which was 50 degrees below zero. We had now covered about 155 miles, and getting well-hardened to travelling. We now had three dogs, having purchased one at the last roadhouse.

The cost of feeding the dogs was 50 cents per pound. Each dog was fed three pounds once a day at the end of the day's travel. The feed consisted of cereals, flour, or anything that could be procured, boiled with meat, fish, bacon rinds, etc. We at all times carried about three days' supply of feed, in case of being caught in a blizzard or other delays.
Starting on our sixth day, we had 40 miles ahead to reach Fort Selkirk. Here we'll renew provisions. On the trail for the seventh day, the next stopping place was given as 40 miles, so we made an early start. After 12 hours of bitterly cold travelling, we landed at a small cabin with its lone occupant, who was pleased to have our company for the night. This man was one of those unlucky ones, who had tried to make Dawson City before the freeze-up.

Starting on our eighth day out, the morning was cold and clear. Our first objective was only nine miles ahead, where meals and shelter was available. We took to the river, planning to reach the roadhouse in about three hours. After travelling two hours, we ran into our first blizzard. Here it nearly cost us our lives. We kept travelling for over five hours, one could hardly see 20 feet ahead.

Undoubtedly, we were floundering around in circles, and almost freezing. I was leading, my partner behind, guiding the sleigh. When he called to me to stop and rest, going back to him, I realized that he was near freezing. I grabbed the whip from him and slashed him twice. He yelled at me to stop, but I hit him again.

He jumped up and took after me. I knew he couldn’t catch me. His anger and endeavours to catch me warmed him and myself also. I now could see the colour coming back into his face. I then stopped quietly, saying, "Bill, how do feel now?"

He at once realized why I had attacked him. We then started on again, taking good care not to leave the riverbank for guidance. After an hour’s travelling, we noticed the dogs anxious now. They evidently scented the roadhouse, which we reached in another 15 minutes. Had I permitted my partner to sit down for 10 minutes, he would have frozen to death. As one freezes, you get sleepy; and that is the end.

Next day, the ninth, we had a distance of 35 miles travel ahead of us. We took good care not to get too far from the riverbank, in case of another blizzard. We reached the roadhouse about 6 p.m., and we were lucky to secure food for ourselves and the dogs.

11:08

On the tenth day, we realized we could not make the next roadhouse. So after travelling about 35 miles, we decided to make camp for the night, about 5 p.m. Selecting a safe place in the timber, we secured amble wood to keep a fire all night. Then built a snug lean-to with a log background. We slept a cold, but fairly comfortable night.

Getting away early on this eleventh day out from Dawson and travelling about 15 to 20 miles, we decided to stop and attend to the dogs’ feet, as they beginning to get sore. Here we made a temporary camp in the woods.

Back to the river again, we were confronted with many open patches of water from which clouds of mist arose. We were forced to take to the side hills of the river several times, making travel slow. In about 20 inches of snow and fallen trees.

While travelling along the mountainside, we had a lucky experience.

12:17

[tape speed slows]
Only 500 feet in front of us, the slide or an avalanche of snow, rocks, and trees came crushing down. After some consideration, we made it across the slide. No sooner had we crossed, when another small slide came right where we had been standing.

12:45

[tape speed returns to normal]

Getting down to the river again, we camped for about two hours. After getting underway, we stopped quickly. We saw three large grey animals run out from the woods onto the ice in front of us. Having no firearms, and only one axe, we began to deal with the wolves. And while hesitating, how pleased we were to hear a man's voice calling his dogs. He had a fine team of Huskies.

Continuing onwards, we reached Lake Laberge that evening and stayed on one of the river steamers that was tied up in winter quarters. We had now been travelling 11 days and covered about 380 miles, which still left 220 more to go. We spent a very cold night.

Starting the twelfth day to cross Lake Laberge, which is listed as 39 miles from end to end, and for its entire length, small trees had been stuck in the snow 400 yards apart by the Mounted Police as to guide travellers in case of being caught in a blizzard.

While the day was clear crossing the lake, it seemed the longest day travelling. After getting over half way, one could see the end of the lake in the distance. And no matter how fast or how far we travelled, it did not appear to be any closer. We kept on, and after five hours reached the end, where was a good roadhouse to stay the night.

The following day, the thirteenth out, saw us again on the river, heading for the Whitehorse Rapids, some 20 miles further along the trail, which we reached early in the afternoon and located a comfortable cabin for the night. The only ones there at the time.

Roadhouses became more plentiful and little difficulty was encountered in reaching Whitehorse Rapids. On the fourteenth day out, we reached Lake Marsh, passing the canyons on the way. Here, one begins to feel that you are nearing the end. Although we still had three more lakes to cross and nearly 200 miles of travel. The thermometer being now 25 to 30 degrees below zero. It felt much warmer than the 50 below we experienced at Dawson City before the thaw set in.

The fifteenth day, we crossed Lake Marsh; then Lake Tagish. Twenty to 25 miles long, and made Caribou Crossing. But owing to stormy weather, we did not reach Lake Bennett until the evening of the seventeenth day. Here we disposed of one dog which was played out. The eighteenth day found us on Lake Bennett, some 30 miles long, which we crossed just before a storm came up, which stopped us from travelling the next day.

This nineteenth day out, we spent reading old newspapers and playing cards, etc. The first real rest we'd had for 20 days. We had two days left to deliver the mail in the 21 day time limit. Next day, the twentieth, saw us on the trail of the Whitehorse Pass that ended at Skagway. A railway had been built to the summit. We decided to ride the last part of the trip. But asking the price of tickets, which were considered exorbitant, also the time of leaving, we decided to walk the rest of the way.
Landing in Skagway ahead of the train, which we saw stalled on the mountainside in the snow. Arriving at Skagway about 4 p.m., we who were still dressed in our Yukon clothes, including fur cap, moccasins, and parka, were met by hotel runners, newspapermen, etc., but knowing the reputation of Skagway, had little to do with them. Two steamers were at the dock. One of them, the City of Topeka, leaving that evening for Seattle. The other steamer: next morning for Vancouver.

We decided to take the City of Topeka, and after a stormy trip of six days, landed in Seattle, just in time to catch the train for Vancouver, still dressed in our Yukon clothes. Here we purchased new clothes, and we reached Nanaimo and home, 27 days after leaving Dawson City.

17:58

[recording ends]