

# George Brackett's



## Minnesota Enterprise on a New Frontier

# Wagon Road

Edwin C. Bearss and Bruce M. White

WHEN GEORGE BRACKETT left Seattle for Alaska in September, 1897, on board the steamship "City of Seattle," he was not aware that all his energy and all his money would soon be tied up in a difficult and complicated venture. If he had known what was in store for him it is possible that he would have stayed in Seattle. Already sixty, he was entitled to a rest, for he had lived a full and active life.

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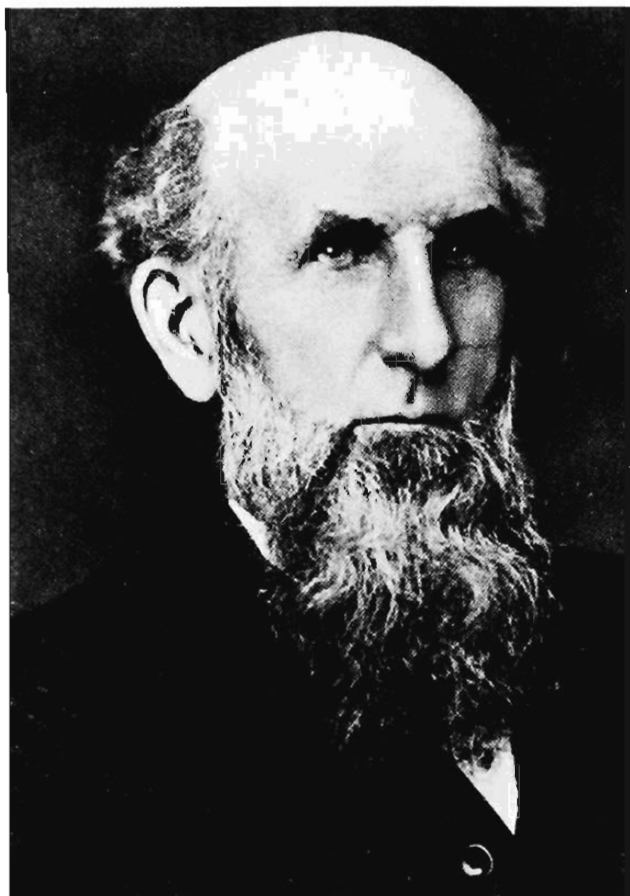
<sup>1</sup>Minneapolis City Directory, 1888-9, p. 311. For more on Brackett's varied life, see *The Story of the Testimonial Dinner to Mr. George A. Brackett by the Publicity Club of Minneapolis* (Minneapolis, 1910); N. C. Chapin, "Charitable Institutions," in Isaac Atwater, ed., *History of the City of Minneapolis, Minn.*, 240-245 (New York and Chicago, 1893); Horace B. Hudson, ed., *A Half Century of Minneapolis*, 490-493 (Minneapolis, 1908); George A. Brackett, "Early Days in Maine," Brackett Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society; *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 18, 1921, p. 2.; *Minneapolis Times*, December 19, 1897, p. 24. On Brackett's resemblance to Lincoln, see undated clipping (ca. 1892), vol. 2, p. 92, Brackett Papers.

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**WORKMEN CLEAR** the right-of-way for the Brackett wagon road (left) leading from Skagway, Alaska, to White Pass City. Construction on the road bearing the name of Minnesotan George Brackett began in the fall of 1897.

George Augustus Brackett was born in Maine in 1836 and went to Minneapolis when he was twenty. A tall man with a long beard and craggy features that reminded many people of Abraham Lincoln, Brackett soon became a prominent and indispensable member of the community. Said to have been at one time one of the richest men in Minneapolis, he was involved in a large variety of business enterprises, including meat packing, flour milling, general contracting, and real estate. In fact, Brackett's life varied so much that in Minneapolis city directories for the period he rarely gave the same occupation from year to year, and in 1888 his activities were apparently so diverse that he could only describe himself as "George Brackett, Capitalist."<sup>1</sup>

Of special note was Brackett's work in the construction of the Northern Pacific Railroad. During the summer of 1869 he was hired to provide transportation and supplies for the reconnaissance expedition which traveled out across the plains along the route of the proposed railroad as far as Fort Stevenson on the Missouri River. That winter he was again hired to purchase supplies and distribute them along the route for later use. Then in the spring of 1870 he and a group of Minneapolitans were awarded the contract to build the first section of track from the St. Louis River to Fargo, which they proceeded to do in two years. This was for Brackett the beginning of approximately ten years' work in railroad contracting, not only for the Northern Pacific but also for the Great Northern and the Canadian Pacific. The experience he gained during this period, as well as the friends he made, were to be of great use to him in Alaska.



GEORGE A. BRACKETT when about seventy

In Minneapolis, Brackett was well known for his public-spirited attitude. He served as an alderman on the first city council, as mayor for one term beginning in 1873, and as an early chief of the volunteer fire department. In addition, he was one of the organizers of the Associated Charities of Minneapolis and, largely at his own expense, started the Friendly Inn, a local haven for bums and hoboes, where down-and-outers were allowed to chop wood in exchange for room, board, and bath. After the Johnstown Flood in 1887, it was George Brackett who persuaded local businessmen to send 2,000 barrels of flour to the survivors of the disaster. He organized the Harvest Festival in 1891, and when the Republicans held their 1892 national convention in Minneapolis, Brackett shouldered the bulk of the work. One of his fellow citizens was certain that the popular phrase "Let George do it" originated in Minneapolis, because in the early days of Minneapolis "George Brackett did it and to his credit, did it well."<sup>2</sup>

As prosperous as Brackett had been in the period after the Civil War, by 1897 he was no longer a rich man. He had been struck by a series of personal and financial blows from which he had not been entirely able to recover. In 1888 a brick building which he owned in

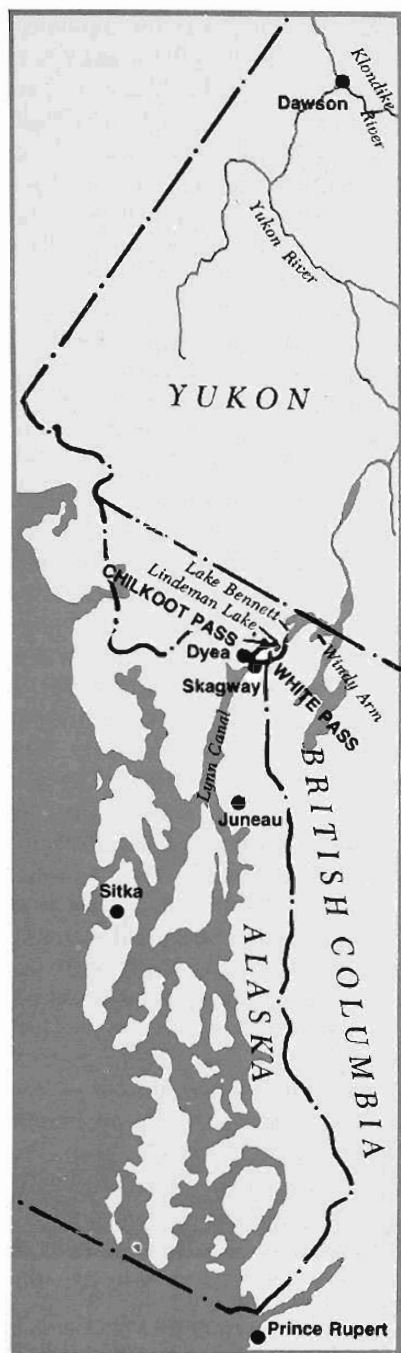
downtown Minneapolis collapsed during remodeling. Four workmen were killed. In addition to bearing the cost of salvaging the structure, Brackett undertook to pay differing amounts of money to the families of the victims, even though the coroner's jury had found him free of responsibility. In 1890 his wife of thirty years died. In June, 1892, just as Brackett was about to relax from a half year's strenuous work on the Republican convention, his large summer home at Orono, on Lake Minnetonka, was struck by a tornado. On top of these various misfortunes came the panic of 1893 and the subsequent national depression. Brackett's business resources seemed to dry up. He was hard pressed to support himself, not to mention the family and friends who depended on him for aid. He was forced to borrow money, including a large amount from his friend, James J. Hill, and to mortgage or sell much of his property in downtown Minneapolis. By 1897, he appears to have retired altogether from business life.<sup>3</sup>

George Brackett was not alone in his financial troubles. The country was in the midst of one of its worst depressions, experiencing what one economist called "the distressful remorse which follows financial dissipation." It was not until 1896 that recovery began, but suddenly in July, 1897, sure prosperity and guaranteed riches seemed to have arrived. On the sixteenth of that month the steamship "Excelsior" docked in San Francisco carrying a number of newly rich miners from Alaska, and \$750,000 worth of gold dust. The following day the "Portland" docked in Seattle with \$800,000 in gold dust. The headline in the *Minneapolis Journal* of July 17 read: "FULL TON OF DUST Is Brought To-day by Steamer From the Yukon. WITH SEVERAL TONS OF STORIES . . . ECONOMIC THEORIES MAY GO SMASH." The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* reported: "A period of prosperity, far greater than anything known in the past, is immediately at hand." This was the beginning of the Alaska gold rush, which was to occupy the attention of the country until the outbreak of the Spanish-American War the following year.<sup>4</sup>

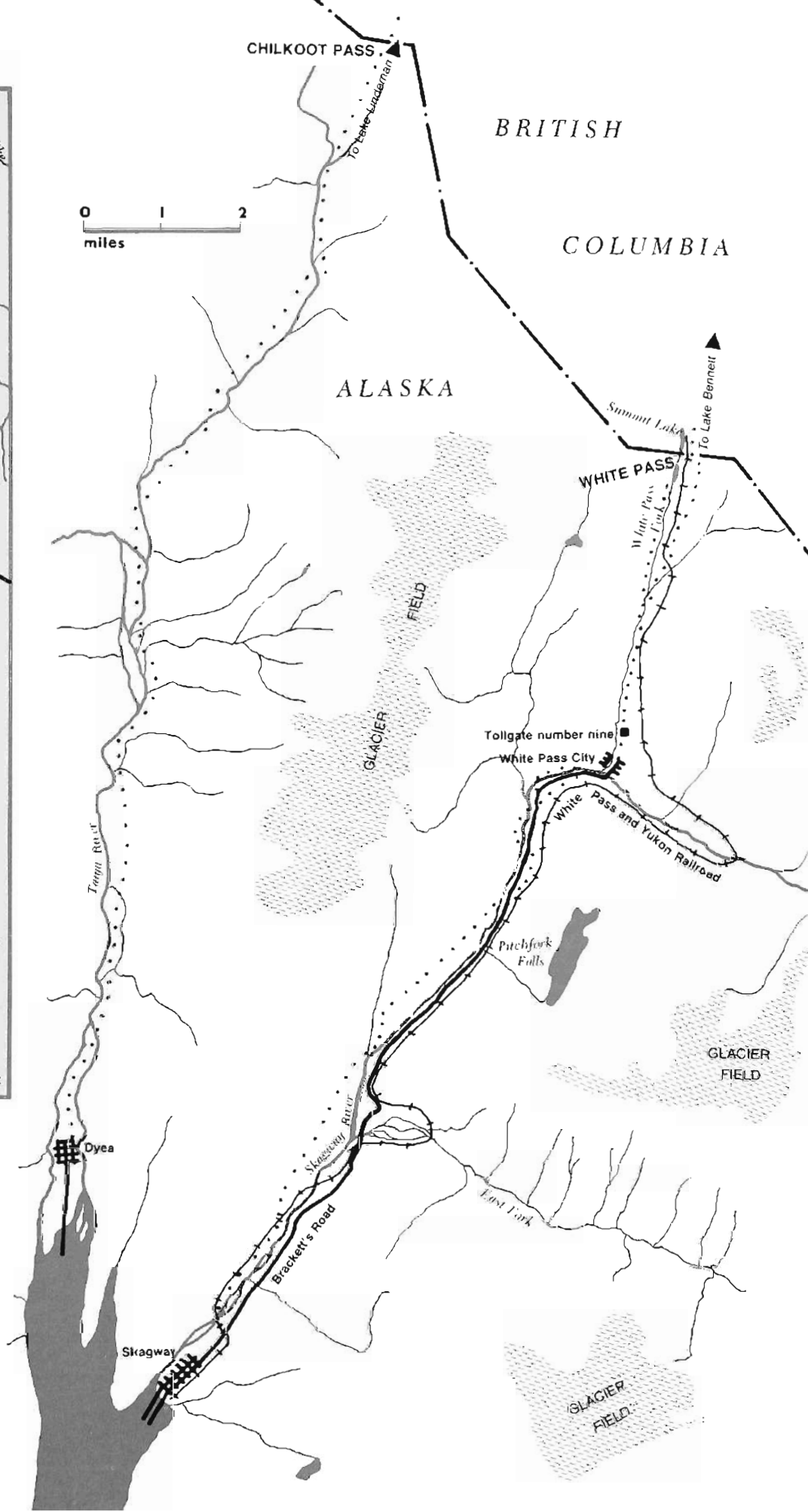
<sup>2</sup> Brackett's role in the organizing of the 1892 Republican convention is discussed in June D. Holmquist, "Convention City: The Republicans in Minneapolis, 1892," in *Minnesota History*, 35:64-76 (June, 1956). The quotation is from *Testimonial Dinner*, 10.

<sup>3</sup> *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 6, 1886, p. 1, 6; May 12, 1886, p. 4, 5; *Penny Press* (Minneapolis), April 5, 1895, p. 3, 5; William Henry Eustis, *Autobiography*, 263-266 (New York, 1936); copies of letters to S. P. Fav, June 22, 1892, to James J. Hill, May 10, 1892, to Paris Gibson, January 7, 1892, July 22, 1892, all in Letter Book, Brackett Papers.

<sup>4</sup> Warren F. Hickernell, *Financial and Business Forecasting*, 1:406 (first quote) (n.p., 1925); Tappan Adney, *The Klondike Stampede*, 1 (New York and London, 1899); *Minneapolis Journal*, July 17, 1897, p. 1 (second quote); Pierre Berton, *The Klondike Fever*, 100, 104-114 (third quote) (New York, 1958).



# Competing Routes to the Klondike



There were many ways of getting to the gold fields, but the most direct, although not necessarily the easiest, was to travel by steamboat to either Skagway or Dyea, two towns at the head of the Lynn Canal, and then go by foot with pack horse or sled over the coastal mountain range to Lake Bennett, the beginning of a chain of lakes and rivers which led to Dawson. Getting over the coastal mountains was the hardest part of the journey. The Chilkoot trail, which began at Dyea, went over the steep and backbreaking Chilkoot Pass and was subject to avalanches in the winter. The White Pass trail which began at Skagway, although less steep, was littered with huge boulders, and came to be known as the "Dead Horse trail," for the number of horses that died and were left to rot along it. It was on the White Pass trail that George Brackett was destined to spend the winter of 1897-98, although he did not know it.<sup>5</sup>

AT THE END of August, 1897, Brackett, attracted by the possibility that some money could be made in selling goods to those going to the Klondike, went to Vancouver with one of his seven sons, twenty-one-year-old James, and arranged to send the young man to Skagway along with a shipment of "sheep, beef cattle, hardware, poultry, milch cows, and other supplies which it is expected will be in demand there at good prices during the winter." The goods were taken north on board the "Shirley," one of the steamships of Brackett's friend Charles Peabody, manager of the Washington and Alaska Steamship Company. Brackett then returned to Minneapolis, after which it was reported that he intended to go to Skagway by way of Vancouver in order to send another shipment to his son.<sup>6</sup>

Apparently he went through Seattle instead, because in mid-September he had left that city on board another of Peabody's boats, headed for Alaska. On board Brackett met, by chance, a prominent Nashville lawyer and former congressman named Joseph H. Acklen, who was interested in building a road across either the White Pass or the Chilkoot Pass. As the ship sailed up the Inland Passage, the two men discussed the transportation problems faced by those stampeding to the Klondike, as well as investment possibilities for businessmen such as themselves.<sup>7</sup>

Brackett and Acklen visited both Dyea and Skagway and examined the two trails. Brackett came to the conclusion that the Chilkoot trail had more potential and was likely to prove the more popular. He bought several lots in the town of Dyea and, after visiting with his son, decided to return to Seattle. What he had in mind at this point is unclear.<sup>8</sup>

Acklen, meanwhile, had decided that the White Pass trail was the more likely prospect. With a group of Skagway businessmen, he organized a company to build a wagon road across the White Pass, to be followed later, if

possible, by a railroad. The company was formed with a capital stock of \$300,000, of which \$150,000 was to go to the original fourteen promoters for their outlay of time and money. Acklen, in addition to signing up for himself, signed up for three of his colleagues in Nashville. Also among the fourteen was one Norman Smith, a civil engineer who had supposedly made a survey of the route. Smith and Acklen left Skagway on October 2, 1897, on board the "Rosalie" for Seattle, where they were to incorporate the company and arrange for the purchase of a bridge, the first of several spans they would need for crossings of the Skagway River. Acklen was then to proceed to Washington, D.C., where he was to see that no legislation "inimical to the interest of the promoters was passed."<sup>9</sup>

George Brackett was also on board the "Rosalie." When he first learned of Acklen's plans, he expressed little interest. Acklen and Smith spent a number of hours urging him to become one of the incorporators. They told him that the venture was backed by the most influential merchants in Skagway. Besides, they said, a man with his experience in railroad contracting would be of great use to them. Finally Brackett agreed to permit them to use his name, but he refused to take any stock until he had an opportunity to return to Skagway and gauge the enterprise. Then, if he did not like what he found, they could replace him on the directorate.<sup>10</sup>

In Seattle the trio contacted John Hartman, a prominent lawyer, and on October 13 they filed articles of incorporation for the Skagway and Yukon Transportation and Improvement Company, in accordance with the laws of the State of Washington. The objects for which the corporation was chartered were:

"To erect, construct, establish or acquire by pur-

<sup>5</sup>Adney, *The Klondike Stampede*, 71-83, 113-115; Berton, *The Klondike Fever*, 146-157, 263-266.

<sup>6</sup>*Minneapolis Journal*, September 8, 1897, p. 6 (quote): Brackett, "Alaska," 1, a personal memoir in the Brackett Papers. See also undated clipping, vol. 7, p. 9, Brackett Papers. James Brackett opened a general store called Brackett's Trading Post in Skagway, a photograph of which is in the *Minneapolis Times*, February 6, 1898, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup>Acklen had represented a Louisiana district in Congress. See Benjamin Perley Poore, comp., *Congressional Directory*, 45 Congress, 3 session, p. 26 (Washington, D.C., 1878). Acklen's mother was a well-known Nashville socialite. See Eleanor Graham, "Nashville Home of Adelia Acklen," in *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 30:345-368 (Winter, 1971). On Acklen's intentions and his first meeting with Brackett, see undated clipping, vol. 7, p. 16, Brackett Papers; Brackett, "Alaska," 1.

<sup>8</sup>An undated clipping from a Seattle newspaper (ca. October 10, 1897), vol. 7, p. 7; Acklen to Brackett, January 28, 1898, in Brackett Papers.

<sup>9</sup>Undated clipping, vol. 7, p. 16 (quote): Acklen to Brackett, January 28, 1898, in Brackett Papers.

<sup>10</sup>Brackett, "Alaska," 1; Brackett to Cushman K. Davis, October 28, 1897, in Brackett Papers.

chase, hire or otherwise, and carry out, maintain, improve, develop, manage, repair, work, control, and superintend any wagon roads, railroads, tram-ways, toll roads, toll-bridges, bridges, harbors, reservoirs, waterworks, gas works, electrical works, quays, wharves, warehouses, steamers, tugs, barges, machinery, locomotives, wagons, pack-trains. . . ."<sup>11</sup>

Before starting for the East, Acklen went to Portland, Oregon, to see Charles A. Bullen of the Bullen Bridge Company about obtaining a bridge for the East Fork crossing. Bullen told Acklen that he had recently erected a 250-foot steel bridge at Nampa, Idaho, which could be dismantled and shipped to Alaska. The two men discussed terms but did not come to any agreement. Acklen continued on to his home in Nashville, leaving the matter to be concluded by Smith and Brackett. By October 20 Smith was in Portland. He reported that the bridge would cost the company \$18,000. Bullen's crew would disassemble the bridge and reassemble it in Alaska in exchange for stock in the company if the company would arrange for transportation. After several rounds of letters and telegrams among Acklen, Smith, and Brackett, it was decided to have Peabody's shipping line transport the bridge to Skagway. Peabody, too, would be reimbursed with stock in the company. On October 30 a meeting of the board of trustees was held in Seattle at which a resolution was adopted "ordering the president and secretary to deliver to J. H. Acklen, the common stock of the corporation."<sup>12</sup>

George Brackett returned to Skagway in the first week of November. Things were at a standstill. The only work accomplished during the previous month had been the construction of a fifty-bed bunkhouse at the East Fork crossing and a start on a second at the crossing of the Skagway River where White Pass City would soon spring up. Brackett met several times with the promoters of the company. He was not encouraged. There was, he found, "a great deal of boom enterprise — all stock

and no money." The promoters were in favor of issuing \$100,000 worth of stock immediately. They were sure they could sell it. David Samson, the treasurer, announced that his brother-in-law in San Francisco would buy all of it himself. Brackett did his best to cool their enthusiasm. He would not agree to issuing stock until he could show that the company was a good asset and suggested that, if each of them contributed \$500 at once, there would be \$7,500 in the treasury. The promoters would agree to only \$100 apiece.<sup>13</sup>

Brackett was by now interested enough in the wagon road to allow himself to become one of the promoters on an equal footing with the other fifteen. He was also elected general superintendent of the company at a salary of \$500 per month. Norman Smith was voted a salary of \$300 per month, and D. McL. Brown, superintendent of timber work, also received a salary of \$300 per month. But a large salary did Brackett very little good if he had to pay it to himself. Work was started on the road on November 8. By then only four or five of the promoters had paid their share, and Brackett was forced to contribute \$3,500 of his own money in order to begin work.<sup>14</sup>

From the beginning Brackett had little confidence in Norman Smith or his survey. When Brackett took the precaution of going over the route with Smith and with Brown, Smith could not show him a single stake or elevation but told him merely that the line ran "here and there." Smith, it turned out, had run a line from Skagway to Lake Bennett with two associates and a pocket compass. Using a Canadian map and "some fairly good guessing as to the general character of the country," he had drawn up his survey.<sup>15</sup>

Brackett's continuing confidence in the enterprise he was undertaking was based on his own observations and on those of Joseph T. Cornforth, a freighter Brackett had met in Seattle in October. Cornforth, from Colorado, had forty years' experience in the Rocky Mountains. Backed by powerful political connections in his home state, he was interested in establishing a company to haul goods from Skagway to Lake Bennett. Cornforth went to Skagway with Brackett and, after examining the route of the proposed road, reported to Brackett that he had never seen a worse trail in his life than this Dead Horse trail, but he believed that they had selected a feasible route for a wagon road and that they should have no great difficulty in building it.<sup>16</sup>

By November 12 there were seventy-five men employed. Work had commenced at several different points along the route so that an estimate could be made of the cost of the entire road. The rockwork, Brackett reported to Acklen, was much easier than he had anticipated. Four miles of roadway up the alluvial Skagway valley had been opened for traffic by November 23, and Brackett had driven a heavily loaded wagon over it. Four more 18- by 24-foot bunkhouses, one of them at the

<sup>11</sup>Articles of Incorporation, Skagway and Yukon Transportation and Improvement Company, October 13, 1897, in Brackett Papers.

<sup>12</sup>Acklen to Brackett, October 17, 26, 1897, Bullen to Brackett, October 27, 1897, Brackett to Acklen, October 28, 1897, minutes of the meeting of the board of trustees, [Skagway and Yukon Transportation and Improvement Company], (quote) December 4, 1897, all in Brackett Papers.

<sup>13</sup>Brackett, "Alaska," 1 (quote); Brackett to Acklen, November 7, 1897, in Brackett Papers.

<sup>14</sup>Brackett to Acklen, November 7, 1897, in Brackett Papers; W. A. Croffut, "A Railroad to the Yukon," in *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly*, 49:648 (April, 1900).

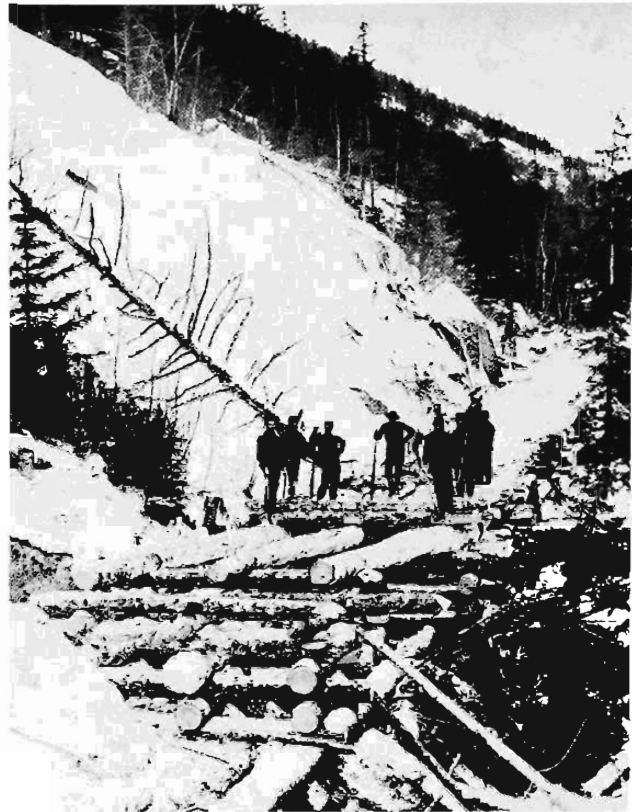
<sup>15</sup>Brackett to Hartman, December 11, 1897 (second quote), to Acklen, December 29, 1897 (first quote), in Brackett Papers.

<sup>16</sup>Brackett to Acklen, October 28, November 12, 1897, in Brackett Papers.





*A PACK TRAIN carries supplies through a canyon on the snowy trail from Skagway.*



*BRIDGES like this at Pitchfork Falls slowed work on the Brackett road and boosted costs.*



*AT LEFT: Construction hands, typical of the road builders, work near one of the cabins put up for their quarters*



*ON A BRIDGE, George Brackett (kneeling at right) studies maps and plans for his road with other construction leaders. Eric A. Hegg took this picture and many others of Klondike "stampedeers."*

summit of the pass, had been finished, and fifty more construction hands had been added to the payroll.<sup>17</sup>

The construction of the road was proving to be a far easier matter for Brackett than dealing with the other members of the company. They were more interested in making immediate profits for themselves than in advancing the interests of the firm. When the first payday arrived, Samson, the treasurer, who operated a hotel in Skagway, had paid each man with a voucher that could only be cashed at his hotel. He had correctly calculated that when the vouchers were cashed most of the money would be spent at the hotel for whisky and entertainment. Brackett was angered by this, and the following day he told Samson that on the next payday the men must be paid in cash and on the job, which they were.<sup>18</sup>

The third payday brought another problem. There was very little money in the treasury. It became apparent that the other promoters had not given up the idea of raising money by the sale of stock rather than by investing in the company themselves. The president of the company, T. M. Word, had allowed treasurer Samson to leave for Seattle with \$100,000 worth of blank stock. Samson had taken what little money was left in the treasury and had promised to send back \$50,000 in gold in two or three weeks.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, Acklen was having trouble raising money in Nashville. There seemed to be little enthusiasm for the project among investors. By the fourth week in November, several members of the New York financial community had contacted a friend of Acklen there, but the situation in Nashville was worse, mainly because rumors had been circulating that the company's survey was worthless. Acklen could not pin them down. He sent a telegram to D. McL. Brown, asking him whether the survey was good or not. Brown was in Seattle, having been sent there in mid-November by Brackett to see about ordering a second bridge for the wagon road and also to try to interest Seattle businessmen in the company. Brown sent Acklen a telegram announcing: "Smith made no survey. Admits that now. Does not even know route."<sup>20</sup>

Acklen, who had been counting on Smith's survey, was shocked, and he indiscreetly showed the telegram to his associates in Nashville, who were naturally even less inclined to invest in the company. Acklen had earlier sent \$400 to the company for himself and his three Nashville colleagues to meet the special assessment on each of the promoters. Now he sent a special delivery letter to the Seattle postmaster, ordering him to deliver the letter containing his check to John Hartman to be held until further notice.<sup>21</sup>

When Samson arrived in Seattle, he was enraged to discover what had happened. He was angry both at Brown for sending the telegram and at Acklen for having been so mean-spirited as to stop a paltry check for \$400. Samson wired Acklen, telling him that a perfect survey had been made and asking him to send as much money as possible immediately. Soon a reply was received from one of Acklen's associates saying, "Judge Acklen very sick. Overwork and worry from present state of your Company affairs the cause." The telegram went on to state that neither Acklen nor anyone else would send any money until they were absolutely certain that the survey had been correct.<sup>22</sup>

Samson became even more annoyed and decided that Acklen must be purged from the company. On December 4 he met with Peabody, Brown, and Hartman, and together they rescinded the resolution of October 30 which had transferred the stock to Acklen. Discussing the actions in a letter to Brackett, dated December 9, Samson described Acklen as "a wrecker of whatever he undertakes, and an all around fraud; a man without means and a man with a very scaley reputation."<sup>23</sup>

That Hartman, Peabody, and Brown had supported Samson in purging Acklen from the company was probably an indication of their alliance with George Brackett. Brackett himself approved of the action of the board. As early as November 23 he had expressed reservations about Acklen. Writing to his friend Senator Cushman K. Davis of Minnesota, with whom he had been corresponding about the necessity of granting a government charter to the wagon road so that it could collect tolls, Brackett had said that Davis should be careful in aiding Acklen when he came to Washington, because, he (Brackett) was not sure whether, if a charter were to be granted for a toll road from Skagway to Lake Bennett, it should be granted to any company headed by Acklen. Even then Brackett was considering disassociating himself from some of his fellow promoters and building the wagon road on his own.<sup>24</sup>

Now Brackett wrote to Hartman saying that he hoped the company would be on a better financial basis and that they had rid themselves of men that wanted something for nothing. He could not understand Acklen's actions. He was annoyed at Acklen's repeated promises about what he would do and his continuing failure to accom-

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<sup>17</sup> Brackett to Acklen, November 12, 23, 1897, in Brackett Papers.

<sup>18</sup> Brackett, "Alaska," 2.

<sup>19</sup> Brackett, "Alaska," 2.

<sup>20</sup> Acklen to Brackett, November 10, 24, 29, 1897, January 28, 1898, Samson to Brackett, November 30, 1897 (quote), in Brackett Papers.

<sup>21</sup> Acklen to Brackett, January 28, 1898, Samson to Brackett, November 30, 1897.

<sup>22</sup> Samson to Brackett, November 30, 1897.

<sup>23</sup> Minutes of the board of trustees, December 4, 1897; Samson to Brackett December 9, 1897 (quote), in Brackett Papers.

<sup>24</sup> Brackett to Davis, November 23, 1897, in Brackett Papers.



plish anything. On the other hand he was also annoyed at Samson for not sending any money, although in each letter the treasurer promised that there would be a large amount on the next boat.<sup>25</sup>

Samson continued to try to raise money — whether for the company or for himself was not immediately clear. During the first few weeks of December he wrote several letters promising that he would soon send a large sum to Skagway. Then he showed his true colors. Taking the remaining \$800 of the company's treasury, he left for San Francisco, never to be heard from again.<sup>26</sup>

"So, one by one, my illustrious partners dropped out," wrote Brackett later. On top of it all, president T. M. Word now demanded that Brackett refund the money that Word had invested in the corporation, or he would secure a court order stopping work. Brackett refunded the money from his own pocket and accepted Word's resignation. Now Brackett headed the corporation in name as well as in fact.<sup>27</sup>

DESPITE all the difficulties he encountered, Brackett was an eternal optimist. He was sure that if the Lord spared him another thirty days the wagon road would be open for travel. By mid-December the first eight miles of roadway were nearly completed. With seven camps and more than 200 employees, he had high hopes that the road to the summit would be completed by February 1, 1898. Thus far the weather had been favorable, with no sub-zero days and little snow.<sup>28</sup>

As was to be expected, all professions and trades were represented in Brackett's work camps. "There was a 'tech' boy from Boston and Worcester, and the Harvard and Yale man, the lawyer, the druggist, men whose ambition it was to reach the gold fields — but who could not until the road was opened up and who were willing to dig." Unskilled labor was paid \$2.50 a day, skilled rock blasters \$3.00 a day, and carpenters \$3.50 a day. Some of the men were more interested in opening up the country than in their wages, but others were "anxious of the dollars, demanding big wages, and as money became stringent the higher the wages demanded." Costs skyrocketed. To get supplies from Skagway to the advance camps near the summit cost Brackett twenty cents a pound. Tents, tools, and provisions were hauled up the trail to White Pass City, because it had been determined to push construction there and work back toward tidewater. Four hundred tons of dynamite were needed to blast a route.<sup>29</sup>

When Bullen's bridge to be placed across the East Fork was landed at Skagway from Peabody's steamship "Shirley," Brackett discovered that it would not serve its intended purpose. He did not panic but set about having a wooden truss bridge built from locally cut lumber. By December 20 the enterprise was broke, and wages for the work force, which had increased to 250, were a week

in arrears. Brackett took passage on the "Rosalie" for Seattle, hoping that he would be able to secure backing in that city from Peabody and his friends.<sup>30</sup>

When he landed at Seattle on the day after Christmas, Brackett was interviewed by a reporter from the *Post-Intelligencer*. He said, undoubtedly thinking wishfully, that nine miles of road had been opened from tidewater, and the "other eight miles is so thoroughly in hand that 225 men with the necessary teams, working in four sections will have it completed by January 15, 1898." When finished, the road would be of such "a character that a double horse team under ordinary conditions would be able to pull one ton of freight from Skagway to Lake Bennett and return in four days."<sup>31</sup>

Continuing, Brackett explained that at every watercourse his people had erected bridges, "using the most substantial rock for abutments and covering every foot of marsh with corduroy of heavy timbers which will require a century of wear and tear to destroy." In the lower box canyon his men had encountered "a solid rock foundation," along which boulders 20 feet high and 20 feet in diameter were not uncommon. These had been blasted out of the way and reduced to crushed rock to macadamize the road's surface.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the glowing picture sketched by Brackett, no money except a small sum advanced by his friend Peabody was forthcoming from members of the Seattle business community. Brackett chided them for employing advertisements encouraging people to go to the Klondike and then doing nothing to make the trip easier for them once they were landed in Skagway or Dyea. "It was cruel," he argued, "to take a man's money, put him aboard of a steamer, and not be willing to contribute a dollar to make successful his trip." Brackett was disgusted by people who patted him on the back and said,

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<sup>25</sup> Brackett to Hartman, December 11, 1897, in Brackett Papers.

<sup>26</sup> Samson to Brackett, December 12, 1897, Brackett to Acklen, December 29, 1897; Brackett, "Alaska," 3, in Brackett Papers.

<sup>27</sup> Brackett, "Alaska," 3 (quote); Brackett to Acklen, December 29, 1897. Acklen returned to Skagway the following year and attempted to get back into the company. He was unable to persuade Brackett, and subsequently he brought suit, asking that the company be put into receivership. He was apparently unsuccessful, although there is no direct evidence of that fact in the Brackett Papers. See Acklen to Brackett, January 22, 1898; undated clipping, vol. 7, p. 16, Brackett Papers.

<sup>28</sup> Brackett to Hartman, December 11, 1897, to Davis, December 17, 1897, in Brackett papers.

<sup>29</sup> Brackett, "Alaska," 4 (quote); Croffut, in *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly*, 49:650.

<sup>30</sup> Brackett, "Alaska," 4. Croffut, in *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly*, 49:649, Brackett to Acklen, December 29, 1897.

<sup>31</sup> *Post-Intelligencer* (Seattle), December 27, 1897.

<sup>32</sup> *Post-Intelligencer* (Seattle), December 27, 1897.

"You're a good fellow with wonderful enterprise," but were afraid to risk a dollar.<sup>33</sup>

The situation looked terribly bleak when friends named Macauley of Victoria, British Columbia, mortgaged their home and lent him \$5,000 without security. This buoyed his morale. As he was forwarding this money to his son James in Skagway so that the company's payroll could be met, a man came to him with a telegram from James J. Hill, who asked Brackett to come to see him in St. Paul.<sup>34</sup>

Brackett was back in the Twin Cities early in January, 1898. Before visiting Hill, Brackett called on "several parties" in Minneapolis in hope of raising money, but he received little encouragement. When he saw Hill, Brackett told him he did not see why the three railroads that had an interest in the gold rush — the Great Northern, the Northern Pacific, and the Canadian Pacific — should not support him in his toll road and in the railroad he hoped to build there some day. The Northern Pacific, Brackett thought, ought to be especially interested, since its line went to Seattle. Hill offered to go with him to see the "Northern Pacific people." They walked over to see Daniel S. Lamont, vice-president of the Northern Pacific. After Hill had explained the purpose of their visit, Lamont said to Hill:

"You are the Great Northern; I am a mere representative of this end of the Northern Pacific and must report everything to the Finance Board in New York. They give me certain sums of money for specific purposes. I cannot divert that money. I wish I could, I would be glad to aid the enterprise; but I cannot."<sup>35</sup>

As they returned to Hill's office, Brackett was glum. Replacing the papers in his briefcase, he thanked Hill for his kindness and remarked that now he "must go back and meet my men without money and drop the enterprise." Hill then invited him to stop by after lunch. When Brackett returned, Hill handed him a check for \$15,000. "I have no security," Brackett told him. "I want none," Hill answered. "Leave your note with Mr. Sawyer and go back and let this go as far as it will towards paying your help."<sup>36</sup>

Brackett stayed at his home in Minneapolis several days before returning to Seattle. While there he was besieged by people who were interested in Alaska,

either because they were planning to go themselves or merely out of curiosity. He excited more interest than if he had just returned from the "spirit world," according to the *Minneapolis Journal*.

"People have invaded Mr. Brackett's house by the hundred almost, today; have camped on his door steps, have followed him about the streets, have adopted every device known to man to gain his confidence and an interview at the same time. They have come in carriages, coupes and broughams; some of them Mr. Brackett is almost ready to think travel in airships, from the pertinacity and success with which they dog his fugitive steps."<sup>37</sup>

Brackett returned to Seattle during the second week in January. He had booked passage on board the "City of Seattle," and when he arrived at the dock he encountered a large mob of adventurers clamoring for tickets. Only a third of those who wanted to go could be accommodated, and when the steamer sailed it was heavily laden with freight and carried 650 passengers, a number considerably in excess of safety standards.<sup>38</sup>

On board the ship Brackett met the notorious con man "Soapy" Smith and a number of his confederates. Smith was the unofficial mayor of Skagway from the summer of 1897 until he was shot just after the Fourth of July, 1898. His real name was Jefferson Randolph Smith, and he had gone to Skagway at the beginning of the gold rush. He operated a saloon and gambling house in Skagway and did his best by this and other means to fleece those who passed through the city on the way to the Klondike.<sup>39</sup>

In Queen Charlotte Sound the ship encountered heavy gales, and a man who had been sleeping in Smith's cabin came on deck and was killed when struck in the head by a lamp torn loose from the masthead. A lawyer friend of the deceased made a great parade of threatening a lawsuit against the Washington and Alaska Steamship Company. Soapy, who knew of Brackett's friendship with company manager Peabody, intervened, announcing that the dead man was a stowaway, had paid no fare, and had met death through his own fault. An inquiry was held when the ship docked in Juneau, and with Smith's testimony, the shipping line was exonerated.<sup>40</sup>

Brackett had another reason to be grateful to Soapy Smith. Soon after his return to Skagway, trouble developed when a trio of outlaws took possession of a section of the road, asserting they had located a mineral claim. Brackett called on the authorities, but they said they could do nothing. He toyed with the idea of turning out a crew and employing force to remove the trespassers and their cabin. But before he could take action, Soapy Smith came to his aid. Smith traveled out to the road with his "Indians," as he called his associates, and visited the outlaws. He told them that they ought to be

<sup>33</sup> Brackett, "Alaska," 5.

<sup>34</sup> Brackett, "Alaska," 6.

<sup>35</sup> Brackett, "Alaska," 6.

<sup>36</sup> Brackett, "Alaska," 6. For more on Hill's loan, see Great Northern Archives, President's file no. 3310, in MHS.

<sup>37</sup> *Minneapolis Journal*, January 3, 1898.

<sup>38</sup> Brackett, "Alaska," 7.

<sup>39</sup> For more on Jefferson Randolph ("Soapy") Smith, see Berton, *The Klondike Fever*, 334-338.

<sup>40</sup> Brackett, "Alaska," 7.

ashamed of themselves, that the highway was being opened at great expense, and that without it none of them could get through the country. Then he asked them to get off the road. They refused. Smith became angry and told them that, if they had not moved in a certain number of hours, he and his Indians would come back and "throw your whole gang into the Skagway river." The trespassers were gone the next morning.<sup>41</sup>

Brackett had one further encounter with Smith. At the next payday, a number of his men had cashed their checks in Soapy Smith's parlor and had either squandered or been cheated out of their money. Brackett went to see Smith and told him:

"You have done me a favor in opening the road, for which I thank you; but for your robbing honest men, and doing as you do, I condemn you. So far as the outside public is concerned, I can say nothing; so far as my men are concerned, you must refund their money, or I shall take means to get it. I have some 400 men and if I can't get it by fair means I shall take it by force. You leave my men alone and I will leave the officers to deal with you."

Smith refunded the money. Subsequently, Brackett's employees were not molested unless they voluntarily entered the gambling dens and lost their pay. If this were the case the men did not complain.<sup>42</sup>

ONE OF THE friends Brackett had contacted in Minnesota was the politically influential Colonel William S. King. A former congressman and newspaperman, King was willing to help Brackett out by going to Washington and pushing for the legislation which would allow Brackett to begin charging a toll on his road. In Washington in January, King found that Senator Thomas H. Carter of Montana had introduced a joint resolution providing for the construction of wagon roads and trails in Alaska. It had not been acted upon, however. In the House, Congressman John F. Lacey of Iowa had introduced legislation extending the provisions of the Homestead Act to Alaska and providing for the construction of railroads. Colonel King and Senator Cushman Davis agreed that the best procedure was to get action in the House on Lacey's bill and amend it in the Senate by adding Carter's joint resolution.<sup>43</sup>

At the committee hearings in the third week of January, it became apparent that the rate suggested by Brackett for his toll road — two cents per pound — would seem too high to members of Congress from the East. It was therefore agreed, and written into the bill, that the secretary of the interior should be empowered to establish the rates on Alaskan toll roads.

With Colonel King pulling out all stops, the Lacey bill passed the House on January 21 and was referred to the Senate committee on public lands, which reported it

to the floor of the Senate with several amendments. The measure was passed by the Senate with further amendments and referred back to the House, which rejected the amendments. The bill then went through several joint House and Senate conference committees. Not until May 14 was it finally signed into law by President William McKinley.<sup>44</sup>

Before King went to Washington in January, he had gone to Montreal to see Sir William C. Van Horne, president of the Canadian Pacific. Brackett knew Van Horne from his days in railroad contracting. After hearing from King about Brackett's road, Van Horne sent a telegram to Brackett in care of Peabody in Seattle, saying that he and two of his friends were each willing to put \$5,000 into the enterprise. The details, he said, could be arranged later.<sup>45</sup>

From Seattle Brackett wrote to Van Horne thanking him for the money and asking the Canadian financier if he could be of aid in obtaining a Canadian government franchise for the company to build a wagon road from White Pass to Lake Bennett when spring came. Van Horne replied by asking Brackett whether he could build the road to Lake Bennett before spring if permission could be obtained from the government in Ottawa. He asked Brackett to send him more complete details of his plans. Brackett thought it could be done but it would be expensive. He would need financial help as well as a right-of-way. Van Horne sent Brackett another telegram saying:

"Minister Interior says go ahead with your wagon road to Lake Bennett on Canadian side and he will see that you are not interfered with."<sup>46</sup>

Back again in Skagway, Brackett wrote a long letter to Van Horne explaining conditions. He had examined the route from White Pass to Windy Arm. He said they would have no trouble at all in breaking a sled trail along his route, which could be used until April 20 or May 1, after which he could build a wagon road from the summit to Lake Lindeman. As to the road up to the summit from Skagway, it would be completed by February 10. Brackett also had hopes of eventually building a railroad across the pass. He realized that he did not have the means "to tackle so large a proposition," but he hoped Van Horne would help him. Meanwhile, thinking ahead, he

<sup>41</sup> Brackett, "Alaska," 8.

<sup>42</sup> Brackett, "Alaska," 8.

<sup>43</sup> King to Hartman, January 17, 1898. For more on William S. King, see Charles E. Flandrau, *Encyclopedia of Biography of Minnesota*, 432-435 (Chicago, 1900).

<sup>44</sup> For the history of the Lacey bill (HR 5975), see *Congressional Record*, 55 Congress, 2 session, Index volume, p. 171.

<sup>45</sup> Van Horne to Brackett (telegram), January 7, 1898, in Brackett Papers.

<sup>46</sup> Brackett to Van Horne, January 10, 11, 1898, Van Horne to Brackett (telegrams), January 11, 13 (quote), 1898, in Brackett Papers.

pressured the Skagway town council into granting his company a franchise to occupy Main Street with a narrow gauge steam railroad. He also put to work a gang to get "ready for the ironwork and engines" to be delivered by mid-February.<sup>47</sup>

Van Horne now wrote to Brackett in reply to his letter and those of John Hartman, who was still acting as Brackett's attorney in Seattle. The railroad president said that Brackett and Hartman seemed to have a mistaken impression in thinking that he could obtain a charter from the Canadian government for the road on the Canadian side. It was too late in the session to apply for a special act from the Canadian Parliament, and he doubted if it could be obtained anyway. Van Horne felt that it would be enough if the minister of interior guaranteed that Brackett would not be interfered with. If he were allowed to collect tolls on the United States side, he could make the toll there cover the entire distance, in which case he would not need any special Canadian powers. Brackett was not satisfied with this suggestion. He could not afford to open a wagon road from the summit to Lake Bennett or Windy Arm unless the

Canadian government was ready to give him authority to levy a toll. He foresaw trouble if he boosted the toll collected at his stations on the Alaskan side to cover travel on the Canadian side of the border.<sup>48</sup>

With no franchise forthcoming from the Canadian government, and legislation authorizing the collection of a toll bogged down in Congress, Brackett was compelled to forego his plan to extend his road to the lakes. Moreover, most of the money raised during his end-of-the-year trip to the states was quickly obligated. Brackett was soon forced to think about sources of additional funds as construction costs soared. He had again asked Van Horne for money. Sir William and his friends could rest assured that any money advanced would be repaid, wrote Brackett, because, having settled with the promoters, he now controlled the corporation.<sup>49</sup>

Brackett went to Seattle in the first week of February to spearhead an effort to raise additional capital. When he boarded the southbound ship, his books showed that he owed \$10,000 in wages. At the office of John Hartman, Brackett found a draft from Sir William for \$7,500, while another \$8,500 was raised from interested investors. This money enabled Brackett to meet his payroll and to satisfy his creditors when he returned to Skagway.<sup>50</sup>

Writing from Seattle on February 7, the day before returning to Skagway, Brackett said he was confident that his road would be open for traffic no later than the fifteenth. He would then begin collecting tolls, although legislation that would give him this right was still bogged down in Congress. Completed sections of the road were

<sup>47</sup> Brackett to Van Horne, January 21, 1898, in Brackett Papers; *Morning Alaskan* (Skagway), February 1, 1898 (quote). See a petition concerning the action of the Skagway city council, dated January 18, 1898, in Brackett Papers.

<sup>48</sup> Van Horne to Brackett, January 29, 1898, Brackett to Van Horne, February 7, 1898, in Brackett Papers.

<sup>49</sup> Brackett to Van Horne, January 21, 1898.

<sup>50</sup> Croffut, in *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly*, 49:650; Van Horne to Hartman (telegram), February 4, 1898, in Brackett Papers.

WITH THIS SIGN (below) Brackett made it clear that he would start collecting tolls beginning March 1, 1898. This brought protests and efforts to get around the tollgates.

AMONG BRIDGES Brackett built was this one over the East Fork of the Skagway River.



already in use, and "a continuous line of teams passing over." A packer could leave Skagway with 2,500 pounds and travel the ice-covered Skagway River (which packers did in order to avoid paying toll). One horse could pull five Yukon sleds through the lower box canyon to White Pass City, where they entered Brackett's trail to Summit Lake.<sup>51</sup>

Although the road was not completely finished by the end of February, Brackett prepared to begin collecting tolls. For publicity purposes, he secured statements from two well-known freighters and a businessman who endorsed his road and questioned the claims made by the backers of the Chilkoot trail. Joseph Cornforth testified that the improvements made on the Chilkoot were far from making the trail easily passable. The tramway which was being built would not be in operation until mid-May, and as it was, a packer could carry only fifty or sixty pounds per trip, which compared unfavorably with the White Pass trail. Pierre Humbert, another freighter, testified that in February he had sent sleds and pack horses over Brackett's road. The route was good, and more than 2,000 people were then moving their outfits across White Pass "as fast as the means at their disposal will permit." The wagon road was "so nearly completed that it is only a question of days when goods can be handled to the head of the Pass by wagon and bob sled." The grades were moderate and as soon as the entire road was open, he was certain that "all travel to Bennett will find its way over the road as the cheapest, best and

surest way of getting through." A. S. Kerry, a Skagway lumberman, had made the trip in the fourth week of February. He found it "a good mountain wagon road, having been constructed in a most substantial manner." The bridges and timberwork were superior, tons of drift bolts had been used for safety; the foundations of the bridge abutments had been "constructed by drilling the rock and drift bolting the abutment timbers directly to bed rock." Except for the bridges and trestles, the roadway was "largely granite," pulverized with dynamite and hammers, thereby making it a perfect macadam road."<sup>52</sup>

Brackett had these testimonials printed on a broadside along with other remarks on Dyea's shortcomings and a covering letter from Brackett charging that Hugh Wallace of the Chilkoot Railway and Transportation Company was intentionally slighting Skagway in his publicity. Wallace soon countered with advertisements of his own, characterizing the statements made in Brackett's broadside as "but the senile wailings of a desperate and disappointed old man."<sup>53</sup>

When Brackett began collecting tolls at the begin-

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<sup>51</sup> Brackett to Van Home, February 7, 1898.

<sup>52</sup> Broadside, vol. 7, p. 11, in Brackett Papers.

<sup>53</sup> *Post-Intelligencer* (Seattle), March 15, 1898 (quote) When William S. King heard of Wallace's remarks about Brackett, he said, "The bad temper and ill manners displayed by Mr. Wallace indicates that he has painful 'corns' on his toes and that his road is a hard and painful one 'to travel'." King to Hartman, March 17, 1898, in Brackett Papers.

*A WAGON moves along the Brackett road toward Skagway. At right is the Skagway River which the road paralleled for several miles.*





ning of March, there was a storm of protest. Many packers refused to concede that he had made sufficient improvements to the trail between White Pass City and the summit to warrant any payment for its use. Or as Brackett put it "I had given the upper portion of my road to the public so long that they thought they owned it." As soon as word got out that Brackett had not been given authority by Congress to collect a toll, the packers broke down several tollgates and roughed up collectors and guards. Brackett called on Colonel Thomas M. Anderson, whose battalion of the Fourteenth United States Infantry had recently arrived on Taiya Inlet, asking him to protect his property.<sup>54</sup>

Colonel Anderson, knowing that Brackett had not yet been given permission to collect a toll, refused to intervene. Brackett, undaunted, boarded the next ship for Seattle where he telegraphed King. King called on the War Department and apparently gave the impression that a "rowdy element" had seized the wagon road and had "placed the country in a state of terror." After listening to King, Secretary of War Russell A. Alger telegraphed the commander of the Department of the Columbia to have Colonel Anderson "take proper steps for the protection of persons and property." Having secured a copy of the secretary's telegram, Brackett prepared to return to Skagway. Prior to boarding the "City of Seattle," he told the press that he "intended to erect a toll gate, and backed by government troops, he thought he would have no difficulty collecting tolls from everybody who passed over his road."<sup>55</sup>

On his return, Brackett resumed collecting tolls. News that the army had been placed on stand-by to assist Brackett was a sufficient deterrent to prevent a mass confrontation. A company agent, reinforced by thirty hard-fisted workmen, was positioned by the tollgate at the entrance to the canyon above White Pass City. When the packers opened a cutoff bypassing the tollgate, the agent turned his men out and extended the gate to close the canyon. Two packers who ignored the tollgates were arrested and fined for trespassing.<sup>56</sup>

By mid-April, 1898, the bridge over the East Fork had been completed. To celebrate its opening, thirty four-horse teams, each pulling between 2,000 and 2,500

pounds of freight, left Skagway for White Pass City. On the same day 200 to 300 pack horses passed through the tollgate south of the bridge. The road at this time was yielding a modest return, with collections averaging \$1,000 to \$1,500 per day. Brackett hoped that the traffic would increase and that he would soon begin collecting \$2,000 or more per day.<sup>57</sup>

NEW DIFFICULTIES began with the arrival of E. C. Hawkins, an engineer, and a group of Englishmen associated with Close Brothers, a British company that proposed to build a railroad across White Pass. Although Brackett was himself still interested in building such a railroad, he treated them courteously, providing them with horses and giving them toll-free passage over his road. After examining the pass, the men decided that a railroad was feasible, and Hawkins offered Brackett \$25,000 for his wagon road. Brackett declined.<sup>58</sup>

One day soon after that, a former associate of Brackett's named Brogan came into Brackett's office with a United States marshal and a third man, known locally as a faro dealer, whom Brackett characterized as a "big bluffer." Brogan boldly announced that he was taking possession of the property because the Skagway and Yukon Transportation and Improvement Company had been placed in receivership. He said he had a claim against the wagon road company. Brackett retorted that there was no wagon road company and that he was building the road as an individual. Brogan demanded to look through the company's books. "You can take the books but not my property," snapped Brackett. The "big bluffer" then laid his hands on Brackett's roll-top desk. Brackett slammed it shut, saying, "You do it over my dead body," and shouted for help. A passer-by who heard him returned with a lawyer named Jennings. After listening to what Brackett had to say Jennings told him, "You have done just right; stand your ground."<sup>59</sup>

Brogan and his two associates then withdrew, claiming that Brackett was under arrest for resisting a United States officer. An inquiry satisfied Brackett that Hawkins, after failing to buy out the wagon road, had established contact with a Skagway banker named Moody and several of Brackett's former fellow promoters. Moody had trumped up a claim against Brackett and through misrepresentation had obtained a court order appointing him receiver for Brackett's company. Fortunately for Brackett his friend Peabody was in town. Peabody helped him raise \$10,000. Brackett then submitted to arrest and was taken to Sitka to appear before District Judge Charles S. Johnson. After hearing both sides of the story, Judge Johnson dissolved the order placing the company in receivership.<sup>60</sup>

Brackett's courtroom victory did not solve his continuing financial dilemma. He was soon broke again and owed \$30,000 to his employees and to his creditors.

<sup>54</sup> Brackett to Van Horne, March 8, April 15, 1898; undated newspaper clipping, vol. 7, p. 18 (quote), Brackett Papers.

<sup>55</sup> Undated newspaper clipping, vol. 7, p. 18.

<sup>56</sup> *Dyea Trail* (Dyea), April 16, 1898.

<sup>57</sup> Brackett to Van Horne, April 15, 1898, in Brackett Papers; *Dyea Trail*, April, 16, 1898.

<sup>58</sup> Brackett, "Alaska," 13. On Close Brothers, see Cy Warman, "Building a Railroad into the Klondike," in *McClure's Magazine*, 14:419 (March, 1900).

<sup>59</sup> Brackett, "Alaska," 13.

<sup>60</sup> Brackett, "Alaska," 14.





*BRACKETT GUIDED Senator Knute Nelson of Minnesota and other members of the senatorial subcommittee on territories on a trip to Alaska during the summer of 1903. In picture at left, Nelson (right) is seated atop the*

*cabin of the "Dolphin" in Alaskan waters. At right, Brackett (foreground) stands with the senatorial party, including Nelson (right, with a derby) at the summit of White Pass on July 6, 1903.*

Once more he sailed to Seattle. There he met with several Boston capitalists who had learned of his undertaking. They lent him \$25,000; their only security was his promise to repay. When he got back to Skagway many of his creditors were surprised to be paid in full as rumors had circulated that Brackett planned to settle their claims at fifty cents on the dollar.<sup>61</sup>

In mid-May, within twenty-four hours of President McKinley's signing of the bill extending the Homestead Law to Alaska, five companies, including Brackett's and Close Brothers, had filed applications for charters to build either a toll road or a railroad across White Pass. The British company was a jump ahead of Colonel King. Its attorney was a friend of Secretary of the Treasury Lyman Gage. Alerted to the president's signature of the act, the attorney had his client's application in front of Secretary of the Interior Cornelius N. Bliss before King could act.<sup>62</sup>

An embittered Colonel King submitted Brackett's application for a permit granting an easement for a right-of-way for his wagon road from Skagway to White Pass along with "terminal and station facilities," and the right to fix and collect tolls. In support of Brackett's application, it was pointed out that construction had started

in October, 1897; that a wagon road had already been opened "with easy grade so that one common team can haul or draw a load of at least 2,000 pounds on a sled in winter or a wagon in summer from tidewater to the summit of White Pass, and from there onward to Lake Bennett"; that the road had been in heavy use for some months; that the business was conducted in a manner satisfactory to freighters and packers; and that the War Department had permitted the collection of tolls to reimburse Brackett for his construction costs.<sup>63</sup> The application was actually fraudulent, because at no time was it possible to drive a team and wagon loaded with a ton of supplies beyond White Pass City. Although Brackett had improved the trail up White Pass Fork between tollgate number nine and the summit, the route was passable only to packers, except during sledding season.

On May 16, after reviewing the documents and map submitted by Colonel King, Bliss authorized Brackett to

<sup>61</sup> Brackett, "Alaska," 15.

<sup>62</sup> Brackett to Charles W. Brown, January 26, 1911, in Brackett Papers.

<sup>63</sup> Bliss to King, May 16, 1898, Letters Sent, Secretary of the Interior, National Archives Record Group 45.

"charge temporarily the rate of tolls that have been heretofore permitted by the War Department." Receipt of applications from other interested parties caused the secretary to defer action on Brackett's request for a right-of-way. On learning of this, Brackett made a lightninglike trip to the nation's capital. Accompanied by Senator Cushman Davis, he called on Secretary Bliss. Brackett told Bliss that he had invested more than \$180,000 in his road, while the Close Brothers and Company had not spent a dollar. He accused his rivals of stealing his rights. After listening to his case, Bliss agreed to give Brackett's company first claim on the right-of-way.<sup>64</sup>

Having secured the right-of-way, Brackett continued to hope that he could build a railroad across White Pass. He had learned from Sir William Van Horne, however, that the Canadian government had already granted a charter to a subsidiary of the Close Brothers for a railroad from White Pass to Lake Bennett. Sir William advised him to sell out to Close Brothers.<sup>65</sup>

After one last attempt to raise money to build a railroad, Brackett in June, 1898, finally came to an agreement with Samuel H. Graves, president of the Pacific and Arctic Railway Company, Close Brothers' American subsidiary. The company was to pay Brackett \$50,000 as compensation for any damages suffered because of the construction of the railroad from Skagway to White Pass and to transfer "all filings, claims, franchise, & right of

way" belonging to him or the toll road. In addition the railroad was given an option to purchase the toll road at any time before July 1, 1899, for an additional \$50,000; until such time, Brackett was to be allowed to operate and collect tolls on his road.<sup>66</sup>

The Brackett road was heavily traveled during the summer and autumn of 1898. It provided the railroad with a convenient route to move supplies out to the grade in advance of the tracks and was at first hailed by the packers and freighters. But as the railroad extended its tracks toward the summit, the packers and freighters were compelled to cut their rates in order to compete. As the tracks approached White Pass City the packers' income declined to the point at which they could only stay in business if they stopped paying the toll.<sup>67</sup>

With the coming of winter, the Skagway River froze over and the packers could reach White Pass City over the ice. Above White Pass City, however, was the upper box canyon and Brackett's tollgate number nine. Although Brackett had improved the trail above this tollgate, the packers claimed to have built it, and they were determined to challenge his right to collect toll there. Between January and the end of March, 1899, they made repeated attacks on tollgate number nine, destroying it with axes and driving cattle through it, although they were several times directed to cease and desist by local judges. The attacks finally stopped after several of the packers were fined for contempt of court. Moreover, the railroad had been opened to the summit on February 21. Although for the next several years the wagon road saw limited use during the winter when heavy snows blocked the rails, it was soon forgotten. No longer maintained, it deteriorated rapidly.<sup>68</sup>

Meanwhile, in 1899 George Brackett and his sons invested in a gold mining company at Atlin Lake in British Columbia. There he remained parttime until 1905. At Atlin Lake Brackett again encountered business difficulties when his company became involved in a lengthy legal dispute over mining rights. But as he later recalled, "I paid my debts when in that country, came out with a clean record, [and] never carried a case to court that I did not win."<sup>69</sup>

In 1905 he returned permanently to Minneapolis where he remained in retirement until his death in 1921. Nevertheless, people still thought of him as a man who would, in Charles E. Flandrau's words, "be off as usual as soon as a new frontier shows up." In 1912 it was proposed that he become involved in building a railroad in Mexico. Refusing, the seventy-five-year-old Brackett admitted that if he were a younger man he would be "more than glad to tackle just such a proposition." But he said: "The making of money is for me a by-gone art. I can only expect to live a few more years and to enter into so large an enterprise would be a burden that I could not stand."<sup>70</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Bliss to King, May 16, 1898. Brackett to Brown, January 26, 1911, in Brackett Papers.

<sup>65</sup> Van Horne to Brackett, May 11, 1898, in Brackett Papers.

<sup>66</sup> Brackett, "Alaska," 15; memo of agreement between Brackett and S. H. Graves, June 24, 1898 (quote), in Brackett Papers.

<sup>67</sup> See clipping dated March 31, 1899, in vol. 7, p. 25, Brackett Papers.

<sup>68</sup> On the attacks on tollgate number nine, see newspaper clippings, vol. 7, p. 19-28, in Brackett Papers.

<sup>69</sup> On the Atlin gold fields, see W. W. Bisland, "Atlin, 1898-1910: The Story of a Gold Boom," in *British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, 16:121-179 (July-October, 1952); *Atlin Claim*, May 10, June 14, July 12, July 26, August 16, 1902; Brackett to Brown, January 26, 1911 (quote), in Brackett Papers.

<sup>70</sup> Charles E. Flandrau to Brackett, January 16, 1902 (first quote), Brackett to Edward A. Seeley, July 20, 1912 (second quote), in Brackett Papers.

THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES furnished the photograph on page 42, those of workmen on bridges and outside a cabin on page 48, that of the East Fork bridge on page 53, and the picture on page 54. The pack train picture on page 48 and the toll sign photograph on page 53 are from the Minnesota Historical Society's audio-visual library. The photographs on page 56 are from an album in the Knute Nelson Papers, Minnesota Historical Society. The portrait on page 44 is from Horace B. Hudson, ed., *A Half Century of Minneapolis*, 491 (Minneapolis, 1908). The maps on page 45 are by Alan Ominsky.



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