

Angel of the Cassiar

Nellie Cashman was an unlikely but determined miner with a thirst for fortune surpassed only by her benevolent nature.

by FRANCES BACKHOUSE

“There is not a mining camp in the country where she is not known and loved, as her many deeds of charity have endeared her to the hearts of all who ever knew her . . . Nellie has grubstaked many a prospector and knows more about mining in all branches than many a man who poses as an expert.”

—*The Klondike Nugget*, April 22, 1900



● above: Cashman dressed in the full-length skirts and shirtwaists characteristic of women's attire in the period for photographs, but chose heavy trousers and rubber boots for the gold fields.

In February 1898, at the height of the Klondike gold rush, Victoria was bustling with people heading north to seek their fortune. Most were men who knew little about mining and had never experienced the severe weather they would face in the Yukon. Nellie Cashman was an exception in all regards. Not only was she a veteran miner, she had once made an epic winter journey through Northern British Columbia on a mission of mercy that earned her the nickname “Miner’s Angel.”

By the time Cashman paused in Victoria to outfit for her Klondike quest, she had spent half of her 53 years as a prospector, businesswoman, and philanthropist in mining camps throughout western North America. And she was far from finished with these pursuits. Her unorthodox calling would lead her on to the Yukon, as planned, and later to Alaska. Eventually, it would bring her back



● Nellie Cashman was one of many who travelled north in search of gold. Here, miners line up at the Customs House in Victoria, circa 1897, to secure their prospecting licences during the Klondike gold rush.

• During the Cassiar gold rush, Cashman and her colleagues travelled by sternwheeler (like the one shown here) to Dease Lake from Wrangell, Alaska, on the Stikine River.



A. HARRIS/COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

to Victoria, where she would be laid to rest in Ross Bay Cemetery. The polished granite plaque that marks her grave commemorates her decades of selfless giving: "Friend of the sick and the hungry and to all men," the inscription begins. "Heroic apostolate of service among the western and northern frontier miners."

Ellen Cashman—better known as Nellie—was born in County Cork, Ireland, in 1844 or '45. She was christened on October 15, 1845—just as that year's crop of potatoes began mysteriously blackening and rotting, setting the stage for a famine that would devastate the country. Her father died when she was about five years old. Soon after, Nellie, her mother, and her younger sister, Fanny, sailed to America, fleeing Ireland's poverty.

The family initially settled in Boston and then moved to San Francisco around 1865. In 1872, after Fanny had married, Nellie and her mother struck out for the silver-mining town of Pioche, Nevada, one of the West's wildest communities, where they opened a boarding house. While saloons and brothels abounded in Pioche, establishments run by respectable women with good cooking skills were rare. The Cashmans quickly attracted a loyal clientele, but they left when the mining frenzy waned. That year was enough to get Nellie hooked on the camaraderie and get-rich-quick possibilities of the prospecting lifestyle. From then on, she was never far from one glittering Eldorado or another.

Nellie Cashman was 29 when she joined her first real mining stampede in the spring of 1874. For nearly 20 years, gold-seekers had been working their way up through the B.C. interior, following a trail of buried nuggets that led from the Fraser Canyon to the Cariboo Mountains, then east to the Kootenays and north to the Omineca River. The Cassiar gold rush, sparked by a rich strike near Dease Lake in 1873, was the last big B.C. gold rush and, like the others, it drew eager participants from far and wide. Cashman went in the company of six men she had met in Nevada, though nobody would have dared call her a camp follower. As one acquaintance put it, "She was unique. Though she seemed to prefer to associate with men, there was never a spot on her moral character." The young woman was slight but tough with a rich Irish brogue and an easy laugh.

Cashman's party travelled by steamship up the coast to Wrangell, Alaska, and then transferred to a sternwheeler for the several-day trip up the Stikine River to Glenora, B.C. From there they walked 126 kilometres along a rough path that followed a traditional Tahltan route. On the trail, she probably dressed the same way she did during subsequent expeditions: in heavy trousers, sturdy boots, and a long overcoat to hide her legs when socializing with strangers. Revealing trousered legs to anyone was a brazen choice, but for Cashman, it was simply a practicality, part of her no-nonsense approach to life.

Upon arriving at Laketon, a tent town hacked out of the forest on the west shore of Dease Lake, Cashman hired men to erect a log building for her. Over the next few months, she later told a *Victoria Daily Colonist* reporter, she "alternately mined and kept a boarding house for miners." While Cashman may have done some prospecting with pick, shovel, and gold pan, her main mining activities were buying and selling claims and grubstaking men who lacked sufficient resources, advancing them supplies or funds in exchange for a share of their profits. Female miners were extremely rare in Victorian times, but Cashman was used to bucking convention. At 20, she had worked as an elevator operator, a job normally reserved for men.

By fall, Cashman had gathered enough gold to retire to Victoria for the winter. Heavy fog halted her ship at Nanaimo, so she and a few other passengers completed the journey by canoe, arriving in early November. A few weeks later, news of a crisis developing up north cut short her plans for enjoying the comforts of civilization. Hearing that food shortages and scurvy threatened the hundred or so men who had opted to overwinter in the Cassiar district, Nellie leapt into action.

In short order, she purchased 680 kilograms of provisions from Victoria merchants and talked six men into helping her deliver the aid. When the steamer dropped them at Wrangell in mid- to late-December, the authorities tried to dissuade them from continuing up the frozen Stikine

River. But Cashman was undaunted. Travelling on snowshoes and each pulling a loaded sled, the rescuers covered as little as eight kilometres some days. At night, Cashman huddled under her two blankets, and once, a small avalanche temporarily buried her while she slept. Nevertheless, a man who met her as he headed for Wrangell found her "as jolly as a sandbuoy."

Seventy-seven days after Cashman and her companions left the coast, they reached Laketon. By then, some of the town's residents "were half dead for want of proper supplies."

That spring, Cashman was too busy nursing sick men (all of whom apparently survived) to reopen her boarding house, but soon she was back in business. She also continued her benevolent works. During her brief stay in Victoria, the Sisters of St. Ann had told her they hoped to build a hospital. As a devout Catholic, Cashman was partial to religious causes and the Sisters of St. Ann became one of her favourites. Over the summer, she cajoled Cassiar miners into donating \$543 for the Victoria hospital, which opened in 1876.

While Cashman certainly dreamed of personal prosperity—"I'm mighty apt to make a million or two before I leave this romantic business of mining," she once said—her generous nature constantly compelled her to charitable works. When she saw anyone in need, she reached into her own pocket and expected others to do the same.

"If she asked for a contribution we contributed," recalled a mining-camp friend. "If she had tickets to sell we bought tickets. If she needed actors for a play we volunteered to act. And, although Nellie's pleas were frequent, none ever refused her."

● top: Nellie Cashman was a devout Catholic and chose the Sisters of St. Ann in Victoria as the recipient of her charity.

right: Cashman's Cassiar gold rush journey route took her up the coast of British Columbia through Alaska, down the Stikine River, and into the northern interior.

below: Cashman would have gazed upon this picturesque landscape when she ran a boarding house and mined in the Dease Lake area from 1874-76.



Cashman remained in the Cassiar district until 1876 and passed through Victoria again on her way back to San Francisco. From 1877 to 1898, she continued mining and operated a series of businesses, mostly boarding houses, restaurants, and grocery stores, in boomtowns across the American West. She also made a perilous prospecting trip to northern Mexico and briefly visited South Africa's diamond mines.

Despite Cashman's many male friends, the only rumour of romance in her life was a short newspaper item in 1889, which announced she was about to marry a fellow miner. The wedding, if indeed one was planned, never happened. Years later, when asked why she never married, Cashman laughed and replied that she had "always been too busy to talk about such things."

One source of busyness in her forties and early fifties was parenting. After Fanny was widowed in 1881, she and her five children came to live with Nellie in Tombstone, Arizona. Three years later, Fanny died and Nellie took over the care of her nieces and nephews, who ranged in age from four to 12.

Nellie Cashman's staunch independence and strong constitution kept her chasing mineral riches long after many of her

colleagues had retired. After four years in the Klondike, she joined the rush to Fairbanks, Alaska. And in 1907, she embarked on her final stampede, to Alaska's remote Koyukuk district, where she lived for the next 16 years. At 78 years old, she could still mush her own dog team over the 560-kilometre route to Anchorage.

Then in the summer of 1924, Cashman contracted double pneumonia. As her condition worsened, she asked to spend her final days with her beloved Sisters of St. Ann in Victoria. She arrived at St. Joseph's—the hospital she had helped finance 50 years earlier—in October and died on January 4, 1925. The Miner's Angel, earthbound no longer. ☹



Info

- **Nellie Cashman** by Don Chaput (Westernlore Press, 1995) is the definitive biography.
- Nellie Cashman's grave is located in the northeast corner of Victoria's Ross Bay Cemetery (the Roman Catholic section) beside the Sisters of St. Ann plot.