



A publication dedicated to the preservation of a classic and timeless vehicle

June 2000
Number 24

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CLASSIFIED ADVERTISEMENTS

THREE-FINGER MACGONNIGLE AND TWO-GUMS GERTIE

by William C. Anderson

There just isn't a more fascinating destination than Skagway, Alaska. According to the *Skagway Alaskan*, the town's only reason for existing is that it was a place from which you could get to somewhere else; more specifically, to where the money was: the \$300 million worth of gold dug up in the Klondike region of the Yukon Territory between 1897 and 1900.

During the gold rush, Skagway boasted more than 20,000 stamperders, making it Alaska's largest city. Thieves, con men and ladies of unsavory repute worked the wooden sidewalks to relieve the unsuspecting traveler of the burden of carrying too much money to the Klondike.

Naturally, such a place was high on our list of must-see locales, which is why Big Red and I had taken the Alaska Marine Highway ferry up through Alaska's Inside Passage to off-load at Skagway. Rocinante, our ubiquitous six-wheeled steed, was now wearing her nose bag and was happily stabled in a nice pasture called the Back Track RV Park.

As all motorhome owners know, there are two places to go to get the lay of the land when visiting a strange locale. One, of course, is the self-service laundry. Here, amid the swishing of the washers and the thumping of sneakers in the dryer, you may pick up more local dirt than you are removing.

The other, of course, is the local bar. For the modest investment of a schooner of suds, you may remove the local dirt and gossip from the bartender to quickly establish the lowdown on the town's goings-on. As a chronicler of the human condition, I must, on occasion, spend a little time doing research at the bar.

I was thus gainfully employed at one of Skagway's cozier bistros, a marvelous watering hole that aspired to be an honest-to-God gold rush saloon. I was engaged in conversation with a garter-sleeved bartender who was possessed of such eloquence of speech that I paid little heed to the fact that he had more ears than teeth. Sam was a fine figure of a man, the personification of the old sourdough you

would associate with Klondike days.

"So you say you're a writer," said Sam, sliding a bowl of pretzels in my direction.

"Yes, Sam. I say I am. My editors often disagree."

"And you got your motorhome plugged into the Back Track RV Park?"

"That's right. We just got off the boat."

"Well, welcome aboard, Cheechaker. If you're looking for a story, you came to the right place."

"When you own a motorhome, good stories just seem to follow you around. For instance, where did the name Cheechako come from?"

"It ain't 'Cheechako,' it's *Cheechaker*. A cheechaker is a tenderfoot or any confused human bein' not used to Alaskan ways — named after a couple gold hunters from Chicago. These two clucks couldn't pour swamp water out of a boot. So the old-timers came to callin' a greenhorn a Cheechaker, cause that's as close as the natives could come to pronouncing Chicago. Name just stuck."

"Fascinating. You have to come to a first-class bartender to get properly educated."

"Ain't no question about that. Since you're into motorhomin', did you ever hear the story about Three-Finger MacGonnigle?"

"Can't say as I have."

"Well, sir." Sam leaned against the back wall and folded his arms. "MacGonnigle was a wily Scotsman who came to the gold country to make his fortune. But he soon found out that swingin' a pickax was really doin' it the hard way. So he came up with a plan. Rather than try to separate the gold from the mountain, he'd separate the gold from the prospectors who had already separated it from the mountain."

"Makes sense. Just how did he go about it?"

"I'm comin' to that. MacGonnigle got himself an old chuck wagon, fixed it up real nice with a canopied bed, got an old player piano and a red lantern that he hung over the door. Then he made a deal with Two-Gums Gertie, a rather fetching

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