
Nellie Goes North

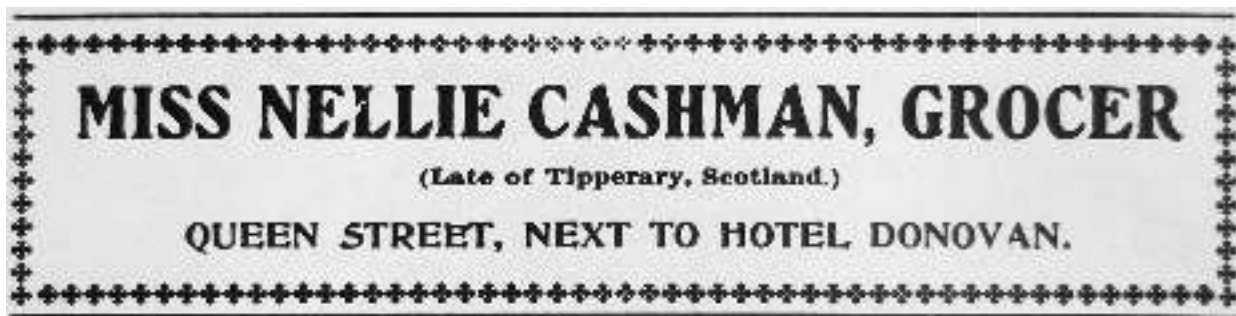
Victorians would have called Nellie Cashman an “adventuress.” They would have been correct. Now remembered mostly as a philanthropic “angel of the mining camps,” she was also a persistent, sometimes hard-edged, prospector, miner, and stamper. Although best known today for her years in Tombstone, Arizona, and the desert Southwest, she spent more than half of her mining career and a third of her life in northern Canada and Alaska.

Ellen “Nellie” Cashman was born at Middleton, County Cork, on the south coast of Ireland, in 1845, at the beginning of the potato famine. She and her family joined the Irish exodus in about 1850, immigrating to Boston. Nellie thus grew up in America but retained through her life a “rich Irish brogue” according to her friend of many years, John Clum. In 1869 Cashman and her mother and sister relocated to San Francisco, and in July 1872 she moved to her first mining boomtown: Pioche, Nevada. Over the next quarter century Nellie Cashman resided in almost every mining state and territory on Pacific Slope, and made speculative side trips to Baja, Mexico, and Kimberly, South Africa.

Women in the mining West often earned a living by monetizing their domestic skills, as laundresses, cooks or boarding house keepers. Cashman certainly ran boarding houses, but exhibited throughout her career a more unusual preference for ventures in retail sales, operating Tombstone’s Nevada Boot and Shoe Store (“Gent’s Furnishing Goods”), high-end restaurants, groceries, and mining supply stores.

Less common still, for Cashman her businesses were a means not only to survive but to finance her mineral interests, “she being no exception to the large majority who speculate in mining stocks.” She purchased several claims in the silver boomtown of Tombstone, and after a decade in the camps was quite familiar with mining terms and techniques.

A sliver district, however, with its metallurgical mysteries and perplexing processes, was a poor theater for individual success. Silver ores, being complex, refractory, and of relatively low value, required capital-intensive, large-scale, industrial recovery. Placer gold at least seemed to offer a better chance at wealth for individual miners, hence the world-wide excitement over the news



Cashman's Dawson City store advertised in the Yukon Catholic of April 1902. Cashman was not late of Tipperary, Ireland, either. (Photocopy, Ephemera File: Cashman, Nellie; Dawson City Museum Archives, Dawson, YT. Courtesy of the museum.)



Photo Courtesy of Alaska State Library

ELLEN (Nellie) CASHMAN

(1845-1925)

The barely five-foot-tall Ellen (Nellie) Cashman was a quintessential gold mining stampeder who participated in many of the North American gold rushes of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. Nellie immigrated from Cork, County Limerick, when she was five years old with her widowed mother, who later remarried the Irish-born farmer and later ferry operator in America.

In 1860, Cashman set off with family members from Boston to Sierra Leone to begin her career in the mining camps of Nevada, Arizona, California, Canada, and eventually Alaska. Nellie paid her way throughout her career by establishing businesses, buying and selling minerals and mining. Because of her constant travels, she was nicknamed by those that she met from her fellow miners, established schools, churches, and hospitals from the Mexican border to Alaska.

Nellie's quest for health took 25 years, first in Boston, then in California, and finally in a hospital in Portland, Oregon. After 20 years, she could not stop her chronic venereal illness. In 1871, during her illness, she successfully developed and operated three gold mines on Nohle Creek in order to be appointed Henry U. S. Marshall of Wisconsin, Alaska. Cashman died in St. Ann's Hospital in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, a medical facility that she helped found decades before. "Nellie Cashman Day" celebrates her stampeder's role in the cultural development of Terrestrial and other Alaskan mining camps. The "Angel of Terrestrial" was immortalized in a 29-cent stamp issued by the U.S. Postal Service in 1994.

THE ALASKA MINING HALL OF FAME AND CITY MUSEUM,
FAIRBANKS, ALASKA

Nellie Cashman's plaque in the Alaska Mining Hall of Fame in Fairbanks, featuring a picture from around her time in the Cassiar District. (Courtesy of the Alaska Mining Hall of Fame.)

from the Yukon in the summer of 1897.

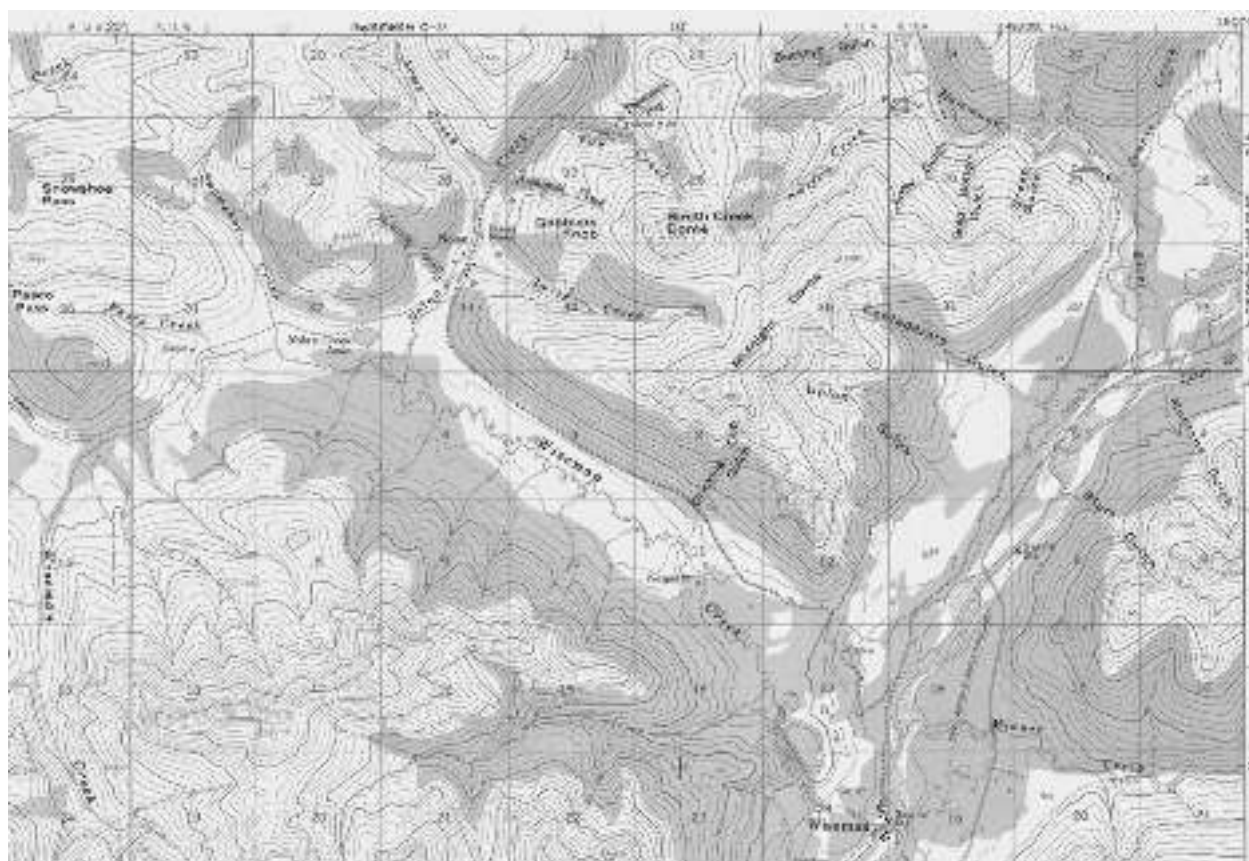
Word of the Klondike bonanza found Cashman, then fifty-one, operating the Hotel Cashman in the transportation and mining-supply center of Yuma, Arizona. Reports from the north promptly ended that undertaking. Cashman reached Victoria, British Columbia, in mid-February 1898, Skagway, Alaska, a month later, and Dawson City, via Chilkoot Pass, in mid-April.

Cashman understood the problems of the Klondike's climate and isolation better than most of her fellow stampeders. In 1874 she had ventured to the placer gold strike in the Cassiar District, about two hundred and twenty-five air miles north-northeast of Wrangell, Alaska, in northern British Columbia. She spent two years working claims and running a boarding house in the district and participated in—her legend says led—an emergency resupply expedition into the district

during the hard winter of 1874-5.

Polk's Alaska-Yukon Gazetteer and Business Directory of 1903 lists "Cashman, Nellie, r[esidence on the Yukon] river front n[orth] of St. Mary's Hospital" at the very northern edge of Dawson City. As usual, she was involved in her charities, among them raising money for the Catholic hospital, operated by the Sisters of St. Ann. At the same time she ran a grocery store on Queen Street near Third Avenue, next to the Hotel Donovan.

As at previous camps, however, her retail business came second to Cashman's mining interests. The *Yukon Catholic* of May 1902 announced that "Nellie Cashman has closed her business for the summer months. She is superintending the clean-up on her claim, 19B Bonanza," the nineteenth claim below the discovery claim on Bonanza Creek. That October, the same paper described "Cashman and Patrick Hannon, proprietors of



A detail from the USGS 15-minute series "Wiseman (B-1) Quadrangle, Alaska," showing the settlement of Wiseman, Wiseman and Nolan creeks, and the "Placer Mine" at the confluence of Fay Creek and Thompson Pup, site of Cashman's claims about nine miles from Wiseman.



The former Wiseman post office building, opened in 1909, where Cashman received her mail during the last fifteen years of her life.



Dawson City's present St. Mary's Catholic Church and school building, was completed in 1904, Cashman's last year in the Yukon. Devout and always a leader in Catholic and community charities, she helped raise money for Dawson's Catholic church and hospital.

19 below Bonanza," still working their claim, as "visitors in Dawson." Although 19 below was her most profitable Klondike claim, Cashman located, leased or purchased others on Bonanza, Rosebud, and Little Skookum creeks.

With the Yukon excitement fading, the *Yukon Catholic* reported in August 1903 that Cashman had sold 19B and otherwise "disposed of her interests in the Klondike." After briefly exploring some other options in the region, she joined the gold rush at Fairbanks the following year. That boom began with the discovery of gold on the Chena River in July 1902. Incorporated the following year, Fairbanks had a population of several thousand when Cashman arrived in 1904. She ran a profitable grocery and miners' supply store there for about a year.

Fairbanks did not hold Cashman for long, however. She quickly became interested in dis-

coveries on a tributary of the middle fork of the Koyukuk River called Nolan Creek. The Koyukuk excitement began only a year after the rush to Dawson. The region developed less extensively and more slowly, however, in part because the Koyukuk proved even more inaccessible and inhospitable than the Klondike, lying north of the Arctic Circle and deep in the Alaskan interior. The first gold discovery at Nolan Creek, the region's most valuable diggings, occurred in 1903.

At Nolan Creek, Nellie Cashman, the life-long stampeder then in her sixties, finally stood her ground. In 1905 she leased the "Fay Pup" and spent her first winter north of the Arctic Circle. Her claims at the confluence of Fay Creek and Thompson Pup lay a half mile from Nolan Creek, which emptied into Wiseman Creek. Nine miles southeast of her diggings stood the little settlement of Wiseman, where Wiseman Creek flowed



Nellie Cashman's cabin and mine on Fay Creek in 1915. (Courtesy of the Alaska Mining Hall of Fame.)

into the middle fork of the Koyukuk River. She developed numerous properties along Nolan Creek over the next fifteen years—possessing eleven claims in 1919—including one named the Cashman Bench.

Cashman hired hands to work her claims on Nolan Creek, which lies in Alaska's permafrost zone. Permafrost miners sunk shafts sometimes a hundred feet and more through river deposits to bedrock, then drifted along the streambed to recover the most valuable gold-bearing sands. Working placer sands under permafrost, even by deep drifting, was relatively safe, and such excavating could continue through the winter. To melt permafrost to permit extraction, miners at first used simple but inefficient bonfires, followed by using boilers to deliver steam to metal steam points driven by hand into the frozen deposits—Cashman's preferred method. Sands extracted during the frozen months were dumped on the surface to await the coming thaw, which provided the water necessary to work the material.

Cashman divided her time between her cabin on upper Nolan Creek, visits to Wiseman for supplies and mail, and occasional trips "outside" to the Lower 48 to visit relatives and seek money to continue developing her claims. To that end, in 1922 she founded the unincorporated Midnight Sun Mining Company—"Nellie Cashman, Trustee. No Offices. No Officers. 50,000 Shares. Shares \$2 Each."

A veteran of many stampedes and districts, she would spend the last seventeen years of her life settled in one place, but one on the rough margin of the world. She eloquently expressed her prospector's preferences to a reporter: "It takes the solitude of frozen nights with the howl of dogs for company, the glistening fairness of days when nature reaches out and loves you, she's so beautiful, to bring out the soul of folks. Banging trolley cars, honking cars, clubs for catty women and false standards of living won't do it."

Yet, the boomer's wanderlust flickered in her still, even at seventy-five years old. "I don't know



One of the miners' cabins extant at the Nolan Creek placers northwest of Wiseman, Alaska. Steam points are visible in front and to the right of the barrel furnace in the photo detail.

how long I'll stay in Alaska," she told *Sunset* magazine in 1921. "I intend to have my claims worked, but after that, if anything turns up somewhere else, I'm likely to pull up stakes and start out."

By then, however, Nellie Cashman had located her last claim. Having gone outside the previous winter, Cashman was unable to return to Nolan Creek in the summer of 1924. Traveling up the Koyukuk in June she took ill at Bettles, about sixty miles short of her claims, was "brought back to Nulato in Sam Dubin's gas boat," then carried to Fairbanks by the Alaska Railroad steamer *General Jacobs*. Well enough to travel again by autumn, she headed for Victoria, and the care of the Sisters of St. Ann in the hospital that she had helped to found fifty years before. There she died on January 4, 1925, to be interred next to the sisters' plot in Victoria's Ross Bay Cemetery.

In 1924 the *Dawson Daily News* declared "the intrepid musher and miner" Cashman to be "probably the best[-]known woman in the North." Her stature rated her obituaries in both the *Engineering and Mining Journal* and the *New York Times*. The *Journal* described her as "one of the first women to enter the Alaskan gold fields as a prospector" and observed that "she was held in high regard by a very wide circle of acquaintances." The *Times* memorialized her as "a woman who commanded the respect of that rough and ready element which prospects for gold from Arizona to the Arctic regions of Canada and Alaska . . . [while] prospecting and staking her own claims."

The eulogy she might have appreciated most, however, came from John Clum: "She was a genuine, dependable, progressive, and sustaining member of every community in which she lived. . . . As a thoroughbred pioneer and seasoned 'sourdough' she had no rival among her own sex, and there were few, if any, among the male adventurers who could qualify in her class."



Miss Nellie Cashman went to Alaska nearly fifty years ago in search of adventure and found it. Should news come now of a gold rush she would pull up stakes and start right out. Why not? She's only seventy!

Cashman, in her mid-seventies, photographed for a feature on "Interesting Westerners" in *Sunset*: The Pacific Monthly, May 1921.

The author of the 1921 *Sunset* magazine article wrote that "Miss Cashman was a feminist long before the coining of the word." Since her death she has maintained a dual status as feminist exemplar and Old West character. She was commemorated on a 29¢ U.S. postage stamp in the Legends of the West series, issued in 1993. More than ninety years after her death, Cashman's grave in Ross Bay Cemetery had become such an attraction that in 2016 the cemetery placed a marker to indicate its location. Another honor that doubtless would have pleased the old sourdough came in 2006: her induction into the Alaska Mining Hall of Fame.



Nellie Cashman's grave, adjacent to the section reserved for the Sisters of St. Ann (background center), Ross Bay Cemetery, Victoria, B.C. Cashman's headstone draws such interest that a separate marker was installed along the main walk to indicate its location.



The U.S. Postal Service's Legends of the West stamp series of 1993 commemorated multiple Native Americans, mountain men, explorers, ranchers, gunmen, lawmen, and showmen, but only one miner: Nellie Cashman. (Courtesy of the Alaska Mining Hall of Fame.)

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