

Story of Blacks Canadian Epic

By Arthur R. Ford

THERE WAS a story in the paper recently of the celebration of the 84th birthday of George Black, ex-MP, former Speaker of the House of Commons and one of the last of the Yukon Sourdoughs of the Trail of '98. His even more famous wife is seven years older and at 91 is still active. They are Canada's most remarkable couple and if ever a monument is raised to commemorate the Yukon gold rush Mr. and Mrs. Black should be the symbolic figures of those brave and tempestuous days.

It is difficult for us in these days of modern transportation to realize the excitement which was created by the news in 1898 of a fabulous gold strike in the Canadian Yukon and the hardships which thousands of people underwent to fight their way under appalling conditions into the new Eldorado.

Mr. Black was a young New Brunswick lawyer practising in Fredericton when word of the Klondike strike flashed around the world. The sturdy and adventuresome lawyer closed his office and joined the stampede. As with thousands of other courageous spirits his quest for gold ended in failure. However, he recovered enough from his claim, to set up a law office in Dawson City and continued mining on the side. Those were wild and stormy days in the frontier town and a vigilance committee with Mr. Black as chairman was established to help maintain order. With characteristic vigor and with the aid of the Mounties law was set up as supreme in the Territory. When a legislative council was



George Black Mrs. Geo. Black

formed he was elected to the Yukon Council. The Conservative Party came into office in 1911 and he was appointed commissioner of the Yukon remaining in that post until the outbreak of World War I.

He at once enlisted and recruited a Yukon Regiment, which went overseas. He was given a command of a battery of Yukoners in the 2nd Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade. He was wounded in the Battle of Amiens. The war over, he returned to Canada and commenced again the practice of law in Dawson City.

When the election of 1921 came he was persuaded to contest the Yukon Federal seat as a Conservative. Despite the fact that the tide was running against the Conservatives he was elected owing to his personal popularity. He was re-elected again in the elections of 1925, 1926 and 1930. It

was a personal triumph. Mr. Black in the House made a name for himself as debater, a master of procedure and a champion of the Yukon and the North. When the Conservatives carried the country in 1930 he was elected Speaker. He was ill in 1935 and his loyal wife, also a Yukon Sourdough, was elected in his place. In 1940 his health recovered and he ran again and was again elected. This was his last campaign.

Mr. Black was always an untiring supporter of the veterans of World War I. Characteristic of his loyalty to the men who fought with him is the story of Mike Zarkovitch, one of his gunners. Zarkovitch was charged with the murder of a German with whom he was employed when they got into an argument over the war. Zarkovitch appeared in court in Edmonton and when asked if he had a lawyer said: "Please telegraph Capt. Black. He will protect me." The prosecutor explained that Capt. Black was at the time in Parliament at Ottawa, but Zarkovitch insisted and the wire was sent. Black wired back: "Please tell Zarkovitch I am leaving for Edmonton at once." Mr. Black's moving plea saved the prisoner. He refused any payment for his services.

Mrs. Black was born in Chicago of wealthy parents. Her parents met during the American Civil War when her father was wounded at the Battle of Seven Pines. He was an owner of a chain of successful laundries. Her first husband was William Purdy, son of a wealthy railwayman. She had a spirit of adventure and joined the trail of '98. She was a remarkable woman, whose heart was always in the Yukon with the old timers. She trekked into the Yukon with thousands of frenzied gold seekers over the famous Chilkoot Pass which claimed the lives of many.

In the Yukon she first formed a claim working partnership with two men at Gold Hill and cooked for a crew of 16. Backed by her father she ran for three years a saw mill.

It was not until 1914 that she married George Black, then a rising young lawyer and politician. For four years she was the gracious chatelaine of what might be called the territory's Government House, while he was commissioner to the Yukon. When her husband enlisted in the Great War she followed him overseas. Her three sons by her first husband were all members of her husband's regiment—one of the sons won the Military Cross. She lectured in England on the Yukon and administered the Yukon Comfort Fund. Back in the Yukon after the war she assisted her husband in his election campaigns. When Mr. Black's health was such he could not stand in 1935 she entered the contest to succeed him and was elected. As a Federal member she was a faithful attendant of the sessions and kept in close touch with her far-off riding. When the 1937 session ended Mrs. Black, 71 at the time, spurned modern transportation methods and traveled from White Horse to Dawson — more than 400 miles by canoe. That was almost 40 years after her first perilous journey to the farthest corner of the Canadian map.

The story of the Blacks is a Canadian epic.

Yukon Sourdoughs

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Mr. and Mrs. George Black, who trekked over the Chilkoot Pass to the Klondike gold fields in '97, still like their home in Whitehorse, Y.T. She is 91, he 84. Together they have represented the Territory in Parliament for nearly 30 years and vow they will end their days as Yukon sourdoughs. (CP Photo.)

Sir Winston At 82



Sir Winston Churchill and His Wife Pose for His 82nd Birthday Portrait.