

## A Sip of Story Juice

"I know *I* wouldn't load my wife and two young kids aboard a twenty-six foot fishing vessel and sail to Alaska," he stated.

My friend Mike was referring to his grandfather, Clyde King. Laid off from his job in the Bremerton, Washington ship yards after "The Great War", Clyde packed up his young family - his wife Emma, daughter Ara Belle, and son Clyde - in March of 1919. They sailed the Inside Passage with a small fleet of fishing boats arriving in Craig, Alaska that April.

"Well, that's how we came to Alaska," piped in Lois, Mike's wife, speaking of her family.

I felt insignificant. My adventures had been neither life-changing or impactful. Mike proceeded to tell more family stories; I sat spellbound. When my apéritif glass sat half-full, I asked, "How many more of these stories do you have?"

His dark eyes sparkled behind his spectacles. "Well, let me pour a little more *story juice*," he teased and topped-off our glasses.

I discovered Mike's aunt Ara Belle, had married Sidney Black, a name aggregated with the lore of the Willow Creek Mining District in the Talkeetna Mountains. Hearing this connection, I ardently asked, "Your uncle was Sidney Black?"

Mike nodded.

"Do you know Dan Renshaw?" I queried. "He owns the Gold Cord Mine, in Hatcher Pass."

"I've never met him," Mike replied. "I think Uncle Sid had some connection. I know he owned the Ready Bullion Mine . . ."

"According to Dan, he also owned part of the Gold Cord," I interjected.

"I have something you may be interested in," Mike disclosed and momentarily disappeared, returning with a manuscript. "This is Aunt Ara Belle's autobiography," he explained, handing it to me.

Opening it revealed an ink sketch with a large tree branch arcing across the page. Beneath, in a calligraphic hand, the title, One Branch of the Family. The following page bore the document's purpose:

*". . . that my children and grandchildren may know what life was like when Grandmother was young. I hope you all enjoy a glimpse of the young woman you never knew and some of the things that made her grow into the woman you know." It concluded with, ". . . this will give you a start on one branch of the family tree." - 1985*

Her words evoked an alluring presence.

"Dan would love to see this. He's quite the historian," I conveyed. The manuscript was loaned. I knew I possessed a treasure.

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My introduction to Sidney Black began with an invitation. One January day in 2014, Dan Renshaw hailed our snowshoeing group to stop for tea at his Gold Cord cabin.

Discarding our gear in the cabin's entry, Dan welcomed the five of us into his tiny but cozy abode. Memorabilia clung to off-white walls and dated wallpaper, a bookcase hoarded historical tomes while one folding table hosted stacks of documents. A laptop sat centerpiece on another. A large, south-facing picture window celebrated the grandeur of the Gold Cord Basin, the Independence Mine, Hatcher Pass Lodge, the Matanuska Valley, Pioneer Peak and the Chugach range.

"Would anyone like *tea*?" asked Dan in his soft spoken, jovial manner, emphasizing the word *tea*. He navigated the cabin's miniature kitchen with adept grace. Drawing water into a pot

and placing it onto a propane cook stove, circa 1940, and setting out a carafe with a filter-lined funnel, he scooped ample portions of his favorite tea into it. His mannerisms bore earmarks of an engineer's: methodical, precise and patient. A mining engineer and consultant by profession, he now spends most of his time at the mine.

As the hot brew removed our chill, I noticed an old photograph in a prominent place. Suspecting his parents, I asked.

"Those are the Hornings on their wedding day, 1900. They left Iowa to 'seek their fortune' out West," Dan expounded, prompting him to put fiber to the loom and weave stories of the past. He described the Willow Creek Mining District's myriad mining claims, those staked and lapsed. Yet, many remain. One, the Gold Cord, continues operations. The towering peaks sentinel these claims and, though scarred by past mining endeavors, they remain reluctant to surrender their golden treasures.

More trips to Dan's uncovered the significance of the Hornings. When Radio Free Palmer recorded and aired Dan's historical accounts, I accompanied him as he chronicled the mine's history and more:

Gold, discovered in the gravels of Willow Creek, lured prospectors to the Hatcher Pass area in the mid 1890's. The first *lode* claims were staked high on Skyscraper Mountain in 1905, later became the Independence Mine.

Charley Bartholf began mining for gold in the early 1900's, staking several claims in the area. By 1915, he partnered with William and Pearle Horning to establish and develop the Gold Cord Mine. Three years later, the mine was sold. Bartholf and the Hornings moved to new discoveries, the War Baby (a derision of WWI) and Lucky Shot mines. Both families then repurchased the Gold Cord in 1928, incorporated in 1933 and worked it until the end of the decade.

Dan's father saw the mine's potential and optioned shares to outside investors in 1939. He ran the mine until World War II, when gold mining was considered nonessential to the war effort. It lay dormant until 1967 when Dan himself began purchasing shares, obtaining a majority of the stake via trying negotiations with the Hornings' son and daughter. He partnered with the Trimble family in 2004, who obtained the remaining shares.

From Dan, I gathered that mines are notorious for their convoluted lineages. However, the mysterious connection to Mike's Uncle Sid remained.

Each time I hike to Dan's cabin I'm always greeted with a cup of tea or coffee and stories. "Over on the Craigie Creek side," he begins and embarks into eloquent, narrative of tale. It wasn't until he guided a hike around the Gold Bullion Mine did he reveal Sidney's story to our group. Lunching in an alpine meadow, we were seduced by his saga.

"Much has been published regarding the history of the District," he affirmed, "but there are additional stories the miners pass down. One, was about a character named Sidney Black. His parents died around 1920 when he and his brother, Bill, were teenagers. Pearle Horning took the boys in. Sidney became a valuable family member and an asset to their mining endeavor due to his strength and ability to do almost anything. He worked in the mines during summer seasons and attended school in Anchorage in winters. At this time, the Hornings and Charley Bartholf operated the War Baby and Lucky Shot mines. The mines were sold after an accident at the War Baby killed a Bartholf family member. They moved their operation to another Bartholf discovery, the Mable Mine and repurchased the Gold Cord. Sidney, then twenty-four years old, joined the expanded partnership as a twenty-five percent owner. Whilst working the Mabel, he fell in love with the Hornings' daughter, Jeanne, and insisted she be his wife. Pearl, a very domineering individual, was adamant her daughter finish her education and marry well above Sidney. She demonstratively demanded he leave!

"The parting was difficult. Sidney decided to leave with everything he owned and never come back. This required an extraordinary pack-load piled onto a steel cook-stove. In an epic trek, he carried his load over the Gold Cord Fault Pass to mining claims he owned on Craigie Creek, the Ready Bullion Mine.

"There are still some old Black claims around here and ruins of his cabin," Dan remarked, in conclusion.

Proceeding down the ridge, we stumbled across a corner-marker of a Black claim. Dan completed our tour by passing the debris piles of the mines. He pointed out each one, conjuring up the images and sounds of a bustling mining district.

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With Ara Belle's autobiography in hand, and a cup of coffee in the other, I indulged, reading her extraordinary travels with her parents and adolescent years. My focus lay on Ara Belle's life with Sidney. She wrote of their meeting at a dance at the Community Hall in Wasilla and their three year courtship:

*"That's the man you'll marry,' one of the neighbors said at first meeting." - (1932)*

*". . . he hiked twenty-six miles for a visit. We spent the evening together and Dad and I drove Sid back to the end of the road so he had only fifteen miles to hike back. He got back to Jonesville [a coal mine, near Sutton, AK] just in time for breakfast before changing clothes and going to work. Courting was hard work in Alaska in 1934."*

Noticing my coffee had gone cold, I reheated my cup and joined their wedding party:

*"First Sid called the minister and asked him if he would fly out in a chartered plane [to Wasilla Lake] and marry us."*

*". . . at five-thirty we heard a plane. It landed on the lake and taxied to the float where we all met it."*

After a very brief ceremony:

*". . . Reverend Winterburger in his frock-tail coat and patent leather shoes, I in my white suite and Sid carrying our suitcase (we had only the one - we started our sharing early in our married life) started walking down the muddy road in a shower of rice." - (1935)*

I braved her early years at the mines with a glass of wine:

*"[In early July] I looked out the window about 2:00pm and saw Bill hurrying down the hill. He stopped long enough to tell me that there had been an explosion and that Sid had been hurt. He ran ahead to see if he could find transportation to the hospital. I watched for Sid and Herman [Sid's youngest brother] to come down the hill. It was a two mile climb from the Gold Bullion cabins to where the men had been mining [at the Ready Bullion]. I soon saw them. From under Sid's shirt hung two red strips. I could see no lower arm but the ends of a red bandana that Herman had put around it for a tourniquet. Sid's hand and lower arm rested inside his shirt. I quickly wrapped a crib sheet around Sid's hand which looked like a piece of hamburger. It was two miles to the Lucky Shot [where] there was a first-aid station. The nurse gave Sid a large whiskey to drink. It was his first and last drink of hard liquor.*

*"We reached the hospital about 7:30[pm]. Dr. Albright spent five hours working over Sid's hand. The ring finger was gone completely. The force of the explosion when the dynamite cap went off had blown it off and a parka squirrel had grabbed it and dashed to his hole for a feast. The rest of the hand healed but the thumb and first finger alone are functional." - 1936.*

Sid left mining for awhile after that incident and began odd jobs and carpentry work.

The next day, imbibing in tea, I assayed their children's births; sons, Benton (1935), James (1937), Dale (1940) and daughter, Jeanne (1941), and their mishaps:

*"We got a Flexible Flyer for Benton for Christmas. He had trouble trusting himself to try sliding belly-buster style. So Sid lay down on the sled and Benton lay on his back. They started*

*down the hill. The runners of the sled broke through the crust in the snow. The sled stopped. Sid went right on down the hill. Benton slid onto his dad's head holding his face down into the crust. By the time they got stopped, there was no skin left on Sid's forehead, cheeks, nose or chin. Sid said the pain of having his face skinned was worse than having his hand blown up!" - 1938.*

Ara Belle related how the Blacks left Alaska shortly before the US entered the Second World War. The government was hiring carpenters to assist in constructing air bases for an impending war and the family took this opportunity to leave, arriving in Washington State. They invested their Ready Bullion holdings in a store and gas station and operated it through the war years.

Selling their venture in 1944, they made countless moves to and around northern California. Times were tough but five years later they settled in Chico, California where their luck changed. They spent years recovering financially and steeped in community service. Sid carpentered while Ara Belle earned a master's degree and teaching certificate. Shortly after, the family moved to Chula Vista in San Diego County. 1952 was a booming time for the area and the Blacks prospered. Ara Belle went on to become a beloved teacher and both she and Sid dove into serving the community.

Sidney and Ara Belle, their children grown, decided to tour the United States and Mexico in their camping trailer:

*". . . when we got home, [we] were worn out from all the new experiences, but full of wonder at the greatness of our country. Every place we visited we saw its wealth . . . " - 1975.*

Having frequently motored the spectacular Rouge River Valley, they decided to retire to Grants Pass, Oregon. Ara Belle described their home while I sipped coffee:

*"We are surrounded by mountains on all sides. The fields and woods around us offer an ever changing variety of wildflowers from March 'til October. Deer wander across pastureland often in the summer. I revel in all the flowers, enjoying nature at its glorious peak." - 1981*

Of course, there were tragedies. Ara Belle briefly mentioned these, focusing instead on the triumphs. This incredible woman, married to an amazing man, impassionedlly concluded:

*"How anyone can get through the ups and downs of life, raise a family, experience death and pain without a deep faith in God and His strength and love, I don't know." - 1985.*

Sidney and Ara Belle returned several times to Alaska, visiting family and friends. Mike recalled a visit. "Sid was a gentle, soft-spoken man," he said, "and, still doing chin-ups at seventy-two!"

Ara Belle passed in the late 1990's. Sidney, at ninety-four, and his daughter Jeanne, visited Dan at his cabin in 2000. "I asked him [Sidney] about these stories of extraordinary strength. He had no reason why he could easily do twice a normal man; lifting, pushing . . . carrying stoves over mountains!" Dan laughed. "He never weighed over 180, five-foot nine. But for some strange reason, he possessed this ability to do things. He learned all of the trades, carpentry, mining, and became a very valuable member of the [Horning] family until his bereavement. It was fun, hearing those stories over and over."

Sidney died several years later.

Listening to tales and reading Ara Belle's memoirs over coffee, tea and the occasional adult beverage allowed me a taste of tenacious folks and history's entwining branches. Perchance the reader has traversed a branch or two? If so, I suspect you partook in a sip of your favorite *story juice*.