

MYSTERY OF THE CLARA NEVADA

WAS THIS SHIPWRECK A TRAGIC ACCIDENT OR WAS IT THE WORSE CASE OF MASS-MURDER IN THE HISTORY OF ALASKA?

BY NICK CARSON

From our vantage point nearly 150 years after the event, it is a bit difficult to realize the global frenzy caused by the Klondike Gold Rush. Battling nature, three rugged prospectors struck gold during 1886 in a stream where the Klondike and Yukon Rivers came together in the Yukon Territory. Just a year later, the “rush” for gold was on and newspapers proclaimed that “golden nuggets could be pulled by hand from the Yukon rivers.” This apparent easy grab of wealth caused a literal stampede of men and

women heading north to claim their God-given right to pull wealth out of the crystal-clear waters. Of course, a major problem remained — how to get to that remote part of the world.

Seattle, Washington,

was soon besieged by an army of potential prospectors seeking gold. Most had no idea how to go about it — how to equip for such an expedition to a hostile area where the weather could change in a moment and how to obtain passage. It did not take long for the streets of Seattle to fill with hucksters that were quite willing to fleece these naïve “prospectors” of their worldly funds — money they had scraped together from family and friends with the promise they would return home with wealth “beyond their wildest imaginations.”

The only way to get to this “Northern Eldorado” was by ship. Basically, this would involve an ocean

voyage from Seattle through the new boomtowns of Dyea and Skagway — rough and ready places that were again filled with individuals willing to take the flood of prospectors for everything they had.

Once those towns had been reached, prospectors were given a couple of choices — a freezing climb through the rapidly-ascending Chilkoot Pass ice stairway or to follow the easier, but longer, trail that worked its way through White Pass. A Seattle newspaper described the prospectors as “stampedeers” and this was probably a correct term since

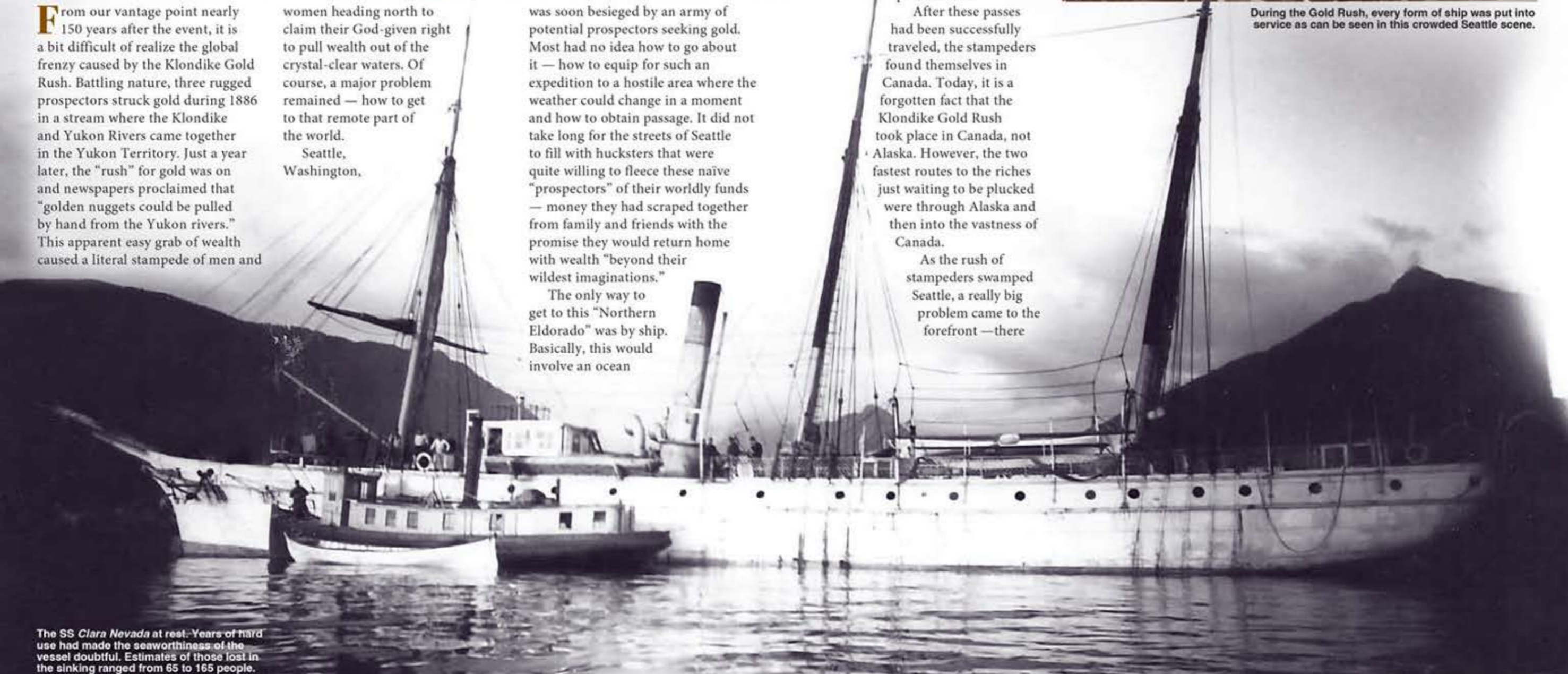
men were literally pushing each other aside to further their place in line.

After these passes had been successfully traveled, the stampedeers found themselves in Canada. Today, it is a forgotten fact that the Klondike Gold Rush took place in Canada, not Alaska. However, the two fastest routes to the riches just waiting to be plucked were through Alaska and then into the vastness of Canada.

As the rush of stampedeers swamped Seattle, a really big problem came to the forefront — there



During the Gold Rush, every form of ship was put into service as can be seen in this crowded Seattle scene.



The SS Clara Nevada at rest. Years of hard use had made the seaworthiness of the vessel doubtful. Estimates of those lost in the sinking ranged from 65 to 165 people.