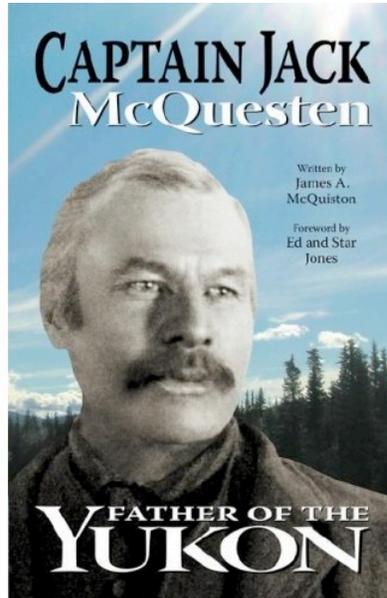


JACK McQUESTEN: A CLASSIC MAN OF COMPASSION AND COURAGE

by Jane Gaffin



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The newly-released **Captain Jack McQuesten: Father of the Yukon** is a delicious read that any bibliophile will want to devour in a few hours.

Yet many years were required for author James McQuiston of Warren, Pennsylvania, to piece together the intricate genealogical puzzle of his distant ancestor.

McQuiston, McCuiston, McQuesten--no matter how the surname is spelled, all are pronounced "McQuesten" and all clan members are kin.

McQuiston's book is the first definitive biography known to be produced about the great northern folk hero, Leroy Napoleon McQuesten, whose nickname "Jack" came about when he was dubbed "Jack Tar", a British term for "sailor".

McQuesten courageously saved a ship and its crew during a frightful storm while on his first trip out on the salt chuck. He may have been working on a Puget Sound-based schooner of which his older brother Varnum was the master for seven years.

Soon, the tag "Jack" was prefixed with the title "Captain" which was very appropriate when McQuesten skippered the first steamboats that plied the Yukon River.

Whites and natives worshipped this gentle giant like a saint, all the way from Stewart City in the Yukon District of British North America to St. Michael in the U.S. Alaska Territory.

His name was synonymous with integrity and honesty. His faith in human nature was childlike; his trust in his fellow men knew no boundaries.

Nowhere in all the northern literature is it possible to find a disparaging word printed against this phenomenal man who took his responsibilities as his brother's keeper seriously.

McQuesten was like a story-book character, almost too perfect to be true. He was living in the hinterland beyond societal and parental scrutiny. But, due to his upbringing, he insisted on marrying the same woman twice.

McQuesten held a profound affection and respect for the beautiful, intelligent and resourceful Satejdenalno, known as Katherine James. When she turned 18 in July, 1878, they went through the traditional ceremony of her Russian-Athabaskan people.

As soon as practical, the couple was married in a Protestant ceremony on August 20, 1878.

Obviously, he wanted his children born legitimately in the eyes of God and white society. At one point he proudly stated to his Stateside relatives how much he loved his dusky-skinned children.

In 1897, he quit the north country and retired wealthy. Generosity had not hurt him. He had cleverly worked on the philosophy that when everyone else is digging for gold, be the one selling the shovels.

After 25 years in the North, he could afford to move his family into a palatial Victorian home at Berkeley, California, and educate his children in the best schools.

Jack and Kate had worked together in the truest sense of partnership. Kate provided the insight and essential family ties that enabled her husband to live convivially in a strange land and be integrated into the native culture.

McQuesten, who stood over six feet tall and weighed over 200 pounds, was not only strong as an ox, he was described as "having a genial disposition with a heart as big as an ox."

The Indians called him their "Injun Papa".

McQuesten extended endless credit under an incredible frontier system sealed with a handshake. He allowed any person who had nothing to barter to cart off all the provisions he needed without the burden of terms or contracts, other than to observe payment was due after the next gold cleanup, whenever that nebulous date might be.

When miners returned from a long, tough slog on the creeks, McQuesten generously recognized their right to a ritual spree.

He never asked for payment until the creditor had his night on the town, which usually resulted in a broke miner coming back for more credit without the wherewithal of paying his initial outstanding bill of \$500 or more.

McQuesten kept outfitting the miners again and again, always letting them celebrate first, regardless of how deep the prospectors were in hock to him.

One of McQuesten's multitude of tags was Father of the Country, a guardian angel who shouldered the responsibility for the welfare of every man, woman and child living up and down the river during an era when a wilderness life was shortened by famine, disease and overwork.

McQuesten came into the country with his two trading partners, Arthur Harper and Al Mayo. Together and separately, they established trading posts and communities such as Stewart City, Fort Nelson, Fort Reliance, Forty Mile, Eagle, Circle City, Fort Yukon and Tanana.

While negotiating fur prices with a dozen or so Indians, one at a time, through an interpreter, McQuesten's patience became legendary for listening to the tedious palaver that would have put Job to shame.

To understand this incredible patience, one only has to look at the kindly face as pictured on the front cover of **Captain Jack McQuesten**.

It is easy to see a gentle and generous warmth in the eyes of this strapping blond man and understand why he was adored by all who came into his presence during his 25 years in the north country from 1873 to 1898.

It was only pioneers of incredible strong character and buoyant optimism who could endure the hardships and primitive conditions while simultaneously showing a charitable hospitality to their fellow men.

Their trading posts also served as post offices and meeting places. Prior to law enforcement and court systems, McQuesten, Harper or Mayo presided over miners' meetings in which majority vote decided important judicial matters.

From these miners' meetings flowed the fraternal organizations of the Alaskan Order of Yukon Pioneers and the Yukon Order of Pioneers. Both brotherhoods were based on the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would be done by".

McQuesten was elected the first president and thus known as Golden Rule McQuesten.

The motto might seem a bit soupy yet these tough frontiersmen respected Christian values as guides to proper conduct in a heathen land where a man's survival depended on others.

The men also entrusted McQuesten with the role as first mining recorder which required squeaky clean honesty. They knew McQuesten would ward off potential claim jumpers and ensure to the best of his ability that each man received the claim allotment to which he was rightfully entitled.

McQuesten sometimes worked as an agent for the famed San Francisco-based Alaska Commercial Company and sometimes he worked independently. Regardless, he was placed on a pedestal for putting human needs ahead of capitalistic gain.

Yukoners remember the famous pioneer in several ways. McQuesten Lake and McQuesten River are a couple of landmarks bearing his name.

McQuesten also was inducted into the Yukon Prospectors' Association's Hall of Fame in 1988. His name is engraved at the base of the bronze goldseeker statue that watches over Whitehorse from Main Street and 3rd Avenue.

In a formal ceremony this past summer, author Jim McQuiston and his eldest son, Jim, came to Dawson to unveil a plaque immortalizing L.N. "Jack" McQuesten (1836 to 1909).

August 11th was declared "Jack McQuesten Day".

Captain Jack McQuesten: Father of the Yukon by James A. McQuiston, 2007, Outskirts Press, Denver, 246 pages, soft cover, index, \$23.95 Can. Author contact: skye2@earthlink.net.