

The Ballad of Robert Harkness (© Barry Truter 2005)

Ballad of Robert Harkness

Barry Truter

Voice

I am an Ov - er - land - er, Rob ert Hark - ness is my name, I
left my home in six - ty two to try and stake a claim, But the gold does not come
eas - y, and I miss my Sab rin - a so, Now I'm head ing back home to my love in
far Ont - ar - i - o.

I am an Overlander, Robert Harkness is my name,
I left my home in sixty-two to try and stake a claim,
But the gold does not come easy, and I miss my Sabrina so,
Now I'm heading back home to my love in far Ontario

They said that it would take six weeks to reach the creeks of gold,
An easy journey westward from Fort Garry we were told,
But as we crossed the dusty plains the days seemed to expand,
Four cruel months of weary toil to reach the promised land.

In New Westminster rested waiting for the winter's end,
Then in the spring to Barkerville to try for gold again,
Angus McIntosh and I pitched our brush tents in the mud,
Lived on bread and beans and bacon, it's all the grub we had.

We tried our hand at digging but there was no luck for us,
We worked the sluice gates day by day but not a hint of dust,
Tried panning in the icy streams in water to our knees,
Sick and tired and hungry and almost set to freeze.

Worked for the Bed Rock Company shoveling their muck,

Now I'm looking out for odd jobs anything to make a buck,
Gilbert Munro's cutting shingles to make houses waterproof,
And I've been dragging creek stones for chimneys for the roof.

This Cariboo will take a man and beat him till he's down,
It'll suck the marrow from his bones until he's underground,
For every man who struck pay dirt there's hundreds digging still,
And I don't want to be buried in the graveyard on the hill.

I am an Overlander, Robert Harkness is my name,
I left my home in '62 to try and stake a claim,
But the gold does not come easy, and I miss my Sabrina so,
Now I'm heading back home to my love in far Ontario.

Transcription by Rosaleen Gregory.

Commentary by Barry Truter

*I am an Overlander, Robert Harkness is my name,
I left my home in '62 to try and stake a claim,
But the gold does not come easy, and I miss my Sabrina so,
Now I'm heading back home to my love in far Ontario*

I first encountered Robert Harkness in the pages of Richard Wright's book *Barkerville: Williams Creek, Cariboo*. We were visiting Barkerville on a family summer vacation to the Cariboo and I was looking for a book about B.C.'s gold rush. It was a rain-soaked day and Barkerville's main street was awash in a river of boot-sucking mud. The wooden boardwalks that fronted the restored buildings of the famous gold rush town were put to good use as we sloshed, hopped and hustled our way down the street. Later that day the sun came out and we walked a short distance along a muddy trail to what used to be the nearby town of Richfield with its wooden court house that "Hanging Judge" Matthew Begbie presided over.

That night in a motel in Quesnel I flipped through the pages of Wright's book and found the piercing eyes of Robert Harkness staring at

me from a photograph in a chapter containing excerpts of Harkness' letters to his wife Sabrina. What more inspiration for a ballad!

Harkness was one of less than three hundred pioneers and fortune seekers who left their homes in Eastern Canada and traveled across the prairies in the summer of 1862. Now known as the Overlanders of 1862, they made the arduous journey in ox-drawn carts, having read inflated newspaper accounts filled with hyperbole of a leisurely journey across the plains culminating in easy pickings in the Cariboo gold fields. The 1858 gold strike on the Fraser River had brought would-be miners in droves up the coast from California or around Cape Horn from Eastern Canada...and now even a foolhardy few over the plains.

*They said that it would take six weeks to reach the creeks of gold,
An easy journey westward from Fort Garry we were told,
But as we crossed the dusty plains the days seemed to expand,
Four cruel months of weary toil to reach the promised land.*

*In New Westminster rested waiting for the winter's end,
Then in the spring to Barkerville to try for gold again,
Angus McIntosh and I pitched our brush tents in the mud,
Lived on bread and beans and bacon, it's all the grub we had.*

Most miners wintered on the coast, trying to earn enough of a grubstake to make the journey back to the Cariboo creeks in the spring. Gold rush camps like Barkerville were hardly a picnic, summer or winter. Miners lived in tents or

shared cramped conditions in flea-ridden shacks. Supplies were scarce and expensive, and sickness took its toll. The work was back-breaking and only the lucky few had anything to show for it.

*We tried our hand at digging but there was no luck for us,
We worked the sluice gates day by day but not a hint of dust,
Tried panning in the icy streams in water to our knees,
Sick and tired and hungry and almost set to freeze.*

*Worked for the Bedrock Company shoveling their muck,
Now I'm looking out for odd jobs, anything to make a buck,
Gilbert Munro's cutting shingles to make houses waterproof,
And I've been dragging creek stones for chimneys for the roof.*

Robert wrote letters to Sabrina from the Williams Creek towns of Richfield, Barkerville and Camerontown. The letters were filled with the details of camp life: the weather, the work and the wages, the price of potatoes, beans, rice and tobacco, and news of acquaintances from back home who were toiling like him in the Cariboo. The letters were also full of love and longing for Sabrina and the children. The early letters were hopeful of making a fortune, however small, but

by 1865 Robert was thinking only of saving enough money to get himself back home to Ontario before Christmas.

Most miners left the Cariboo disappointed. Some stayed in the newly-minted province of British Columbia, making a living in the cities and towns springing up in southern B.C. Others realized the grass is not always greener on the other side.

*This Cariboo will take a man and beat him 'till he's down,
It'll suck the marrow from his bones until he's underground,
For every man who struck pay dirt there's hundreds digging still,
And I don't want to be buried in the graveyard on the hill.*

I wrote "The Ballad of Robert Harkness" because the Cariboo gold rush with its impact on B.C. history fascinated me and the excerpts from Harkness' letters gave me the viewpoint and historical detail I needed. I had no idea what happened to Robert or if he ever saw his family again. So it was with astonishment and joy that I received an e-mail one day from Isabel K. Eddy, the grand-daughter of Robert Harkness.

In a coincidence that speaks of far fewer than six degrees of separation, a musician friend of mine, Andrea Smith, was in New Brunswick visiting the family of her close friend, John, who had just passed away. It turns out John was the great grandson of Robert Harkness, a fact that Andrea only discovered when John's mother, Isabel, made a passing reference to her grandfa-

ther, Robert, and the gold rush. Andrea told Isabel about the song I'd written about Robert. That led to some delightful correspondence between Isabel and myself. I sent her the recording of the song and in return she sent me a copy of her self-published book *The Life of Robert Harkness (1833-1883)*. Once again Robert's striking face with the piercing eyes was staring at me from the pages of a book!

Robert Harkness did make it back home to his wife and family in Ontario. As Isabel writes, "From my point of view it is fortunate that he returned to Sabrina, or there never would have been a Mary Dell Harkness (my mother) or an Isabel."

Barry Truter, Vancouver, B.C.

Barry Truter is a member of Vancouver folk group Fraser Union (www.fraserunion.com), two of whose CDs This Old World and B.C. Songbook contain "The Ballad of Robert Harkness." Both CDs are available through CD Baby, as are other Fraser Union CDs, including From There to Here and Hello Stranger!. Barry has also recorded a solo CD, Traveller. See the Fraser Union website for more details.