

# An Iowan's Yukon Adventure

by Marietta Miller Schaal



Iowan Marietta ("Etta") Schaal poses in her wolverine parka, surrounded by three dogs and mining equipment, near Magnet Gulch in the Yukon.

In 1911, David F. Schaal donated an eight-foot mammoth tusk to the State Historical Museum. He had found it a decade earlier in the deep, gold-bearing gravel deposits of Magnet Gulch, near Dawson City in the Yukon. The museum displayed the tusk in the typical fashion of the day—in a "cabinet of curiosities," showing the artifact for its own sake, but with no interpretation to reveal its larger significance or context, and no story to capture our imagination.

Nearly a century later, the museum again displayed Schaal's tusk, in its "Mammoth: Witness to Change" exhibit. A museum visitor named Mabel Hudson, of West Des Moines, spotted the tusk and realized that it was the one donated by her father. She invited me to lunch and showed me her mother's photo albums and the following text, "Account of Trip to Yukon Territory."

Here was the story behind the tusk. In 1900 Fred Schaal of Seattle had convinced his brother David, then of Polk City, Iowa, to travel with him to the Yukon. The next year David's wife, Marietta ("Etta") Schaal, and Fred's wife, Franc, joined their husbands in the goldfields. Thanks to Etta's words and photos (which she took with a small box camera), we see their Yukon adventure through the eyes of a 26-year-old Iowa woman.

—Bill Johnson, museum curator



David F. Schaal holds the tusk—the left incisor—of a woolly mammoth, next to more tusks and bones found in the Schaal diggings. Mammoth remains, which in the Yukon date back 30,000 years, are also found in river and glacial deposits in Iowa. See the Schaal tusk in the "Mammoth: Witness to Change" exhibit in the State Historical Building, Des Moines.





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The Yukoner stops to take on wood for fuel, between White Horse and Dawson. Right: Mrs. Seeborn with camera, and Etta.

On July 1, 1901 we left Polk City via the Northwestern to St. Paul and from there over the Northern Pacific on the North Coast Limited, passing through Minnesota, North Dakota, Montana, Idaho, and Washington, reaching Seattle in the evening of July 4.

After a good night's rest we started out in the morning to find when a first-class passenger steamer would sail for Alaska and found that the Dolphin would sail in two days, so we purchased our tickets and secured our state-rooms, then set out to take in the town, which we did as thoroughly as our time would permit for there are many things of interest in Seattle. The view which I enjoyed the most—and never shall forget—was beautiful Mt. Rainier, the perpetual snow-capped mountain 40 miles distant.

It was with happy hearts we boarded our steamer about 7 o'clock the evening of July 6, for she was billed to sail at 8 P.M. We were four days on the Dolphin and had every comfort one could enjoy in their own home, and such elegant meals I had never seen before. The scenery was beautiful, so many wooded islands, Indian villages, etc. At Petersburg

our steamer landed for an hour or more and while there we visited the salmon canning factory where nearly all the [employees] are Indians. They have a nice mission there where a missionary teaches them.

We also visited Ft. Wrangel, where there is also a mission and near it is a totem pole carved by the Indians. Wherever our boat landed to take on wood, the Indians would come out of the woods to see the sights, the passing steamers are the most they see or know of the outside world. On the eve. of July 10 we reached Skagway, a rude little town nestled among the mountains and overlooking the oceans. This is a Military post where the U.S. Govt. has stationed probably a few hundred soldiers. We visited the barracks, took a walk up a mountain trail, and retired about 11 o'clock while it was still broad daylight, as we were so far North now and in the long days. On the following morning we left Skagway for White Horse, a distance of 112 miles over the narrow gauge R.R., the White Pass and Yukon R.R. fare being \$20, or 16 <sup>2</sup>/<sub>3</sub> cents a mile. This building of this road is said to be one of the greatest engineering feats that was ever accomplished.

There are many places where the solid rock has been blasted around the sides of the mountain only wide enough for the little cars to pass, others where for miles tunnels have been made through mountains, and still other places where great high trestles are built over chasms to look down which makes you feel that your life is as uncertain as the rickety little train you are riding on. We felt a little safer when we were over the summit and on more level ground, but still better when we reached White Horse that evening and found we could get one of the nicest of the many river boats, the Yukoner, out of town that same day.

We had several hours and so visited the Barracks, this being a Canadian Govt. post. Here our trunks were inspected, and I had to pay \$2.50 duty on my camera. Our trip of two days and nights down the Yukon R. was full of interest and very pleasant in every way. Along the banks of the river we saw many queer Indian graves; also some very nice military stations. We reached Dawson, our destination, about 8 P.M. and telephoned out to the boys we had arrived and would be out on the first stage we could get; their claim being 12 miles from Dawson. We





reached there about 11 o'clock, and it was still light as day.

The little log cabin Mr. Schaal had secured for our home was about 12 x 14 ft. square, had one window, one sash, and one door in it. Built onto this was what is called a cache, a place where all the provisions are kept. We ordered a stove, a little cast iron,

what would cost perhaps 10 or 15 dollars here, and it cost us \$40 there. We had a hand-made bed, table, and one chair, and for cupboards we nailed boxes up on the wall. We burned wood, and for this paid \$16 per cord. The blueberries were now ripe, and we used to go every day and gather all we could use. They were equal

to our strawberries or raspberries here. The red raspberries, currants, and cranberries were also plentiful, and we preserved all we needed of them for our winter's use.

In September . . . we moved into . . . a larger and warmer [cabin]. I then began to bake bread to sell. I received 25 cents a loaf where I sold it or \$6 for baking up a sack of flour, they furnishing the flour. I soon had all the customers I could supply. I baked nearly every day from 15 to 17 loaves. The days were now getting pretty short. I thought it so romantic to burn candles, but later on I was glad to have a lamp, a very plain one but cost \$2.50 and a five gal. can of oil cost \$5. About this time we bought our winter supply of provisions which cost us between \$350 and \$400. Our potatoes cost 22 cents per pound, or \$13 per bushel. These we kept piled up in sacks in our cabin, so you know our cabin was warm. The boxes containing the canned goods, cream, milk, corn, tomatoes, beans, peas, salmon, oysters, pumpkins, all kinds of fruit, etc., were opened on the side and stacked up, thus taking less room and being very convenient. We also bought dried fruit and crackers by the box and

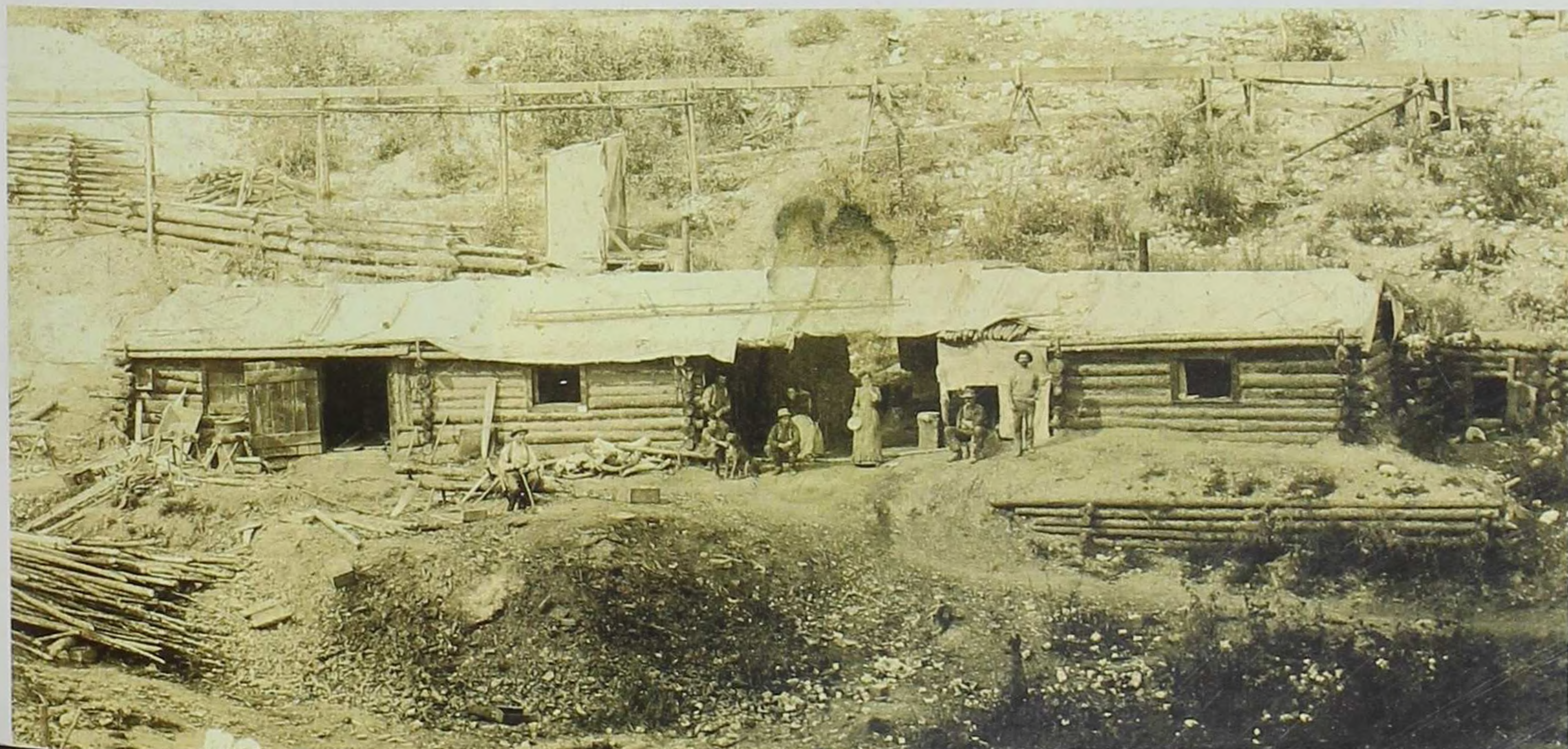


Top of page and here: Two views of Etta and Dave Schaal's 12 x 14 cabin, with bleached flour sacks on the walls to cut the cold and brighten the cabin. Right: Etta's sister-in-law Franc Schaal with her son Roy, in Franc's cabin.





Two commercial photos of Magnet Gulch, near the Schaals' diggings. Left: Miners show their determination in the rough terrain. Below: a miner's cabin far larger than the Schaal cabin.







Garvie's Hotel & Lunch Room advertises meals for miners, and stables for horses and dogs.

flour by the hundred. These with the coffee, sugar, hams, and bacon we put in the cache for they would not freeze. A case of eggs cost us \$30. We also used the crystallized egg which was as good for baking purposes as any. The Yukon river



Etta and a friend. Books, music, letters, and social visits helped while away long winter nights.

froze over at Dawson on Nov. 11, and after this the mail was carried in on sleds drawn by dog teams until the ice was very thick, then by horses. We had mail all winter and could buy most any paper or periodical we wanted of the different news boys who made regular trips out on the creek. We had good neighbors near us and often visited and spent the evening from cabin to cabin. There are people there from nearly every country in the world except Chinese, and

a number of these came as far as White Horse and were sent back. This gives an excellent chance for study of the nationalities. One soon learns to distinguish them by sight.

The days were very short in the winter. We would light our lamp soon after 4 o'clock in the P.M. and burn it in the mornings until 10 o'clock; for about three months we did not see the sun at all, but the delightful summers more than compensated for the long winters. The first snow fell Sept. 28, and from then until in June we could see snow somewhere on the north sides of the hills. One thing that added greatly to our enjoyment was a beautiful pianola owned by a Mr. Northrup, near us, a nephew of Helen Gould. The pianola was purchased by Helen Gould in New York City at a cost of \$1,000 and sent as a present to her nephew. We with others were often invited in of evenings to hear it, and I never before or since have enjoyed music so much. We also had two men near us who played the violin and guitar together, and they with several others used to spend a good many

evenings at our cabin. Altogether the winter was very pleasant even if it was often 60° below zero. Two other ladies and myself made it a rule to call on each other on the coldest days just to say we had been out. This fact made one man say he knew we were chuchaco's by our being out, if we had been sour-doughs we would know better. These are the Indian terms for new and old.

In the spring I took a few boarders, had five most of the time from March until we came out in September. I received \$2 per day each for their board. This with my bread baking kept me quite busy. On the night of June 21 a party of us went to one of the highest points near us for a picnic. We saw the sun until 11 o'clock, and it came up again at 2 o'clock. We took several pictures by the natural light at midnight which are as clear as any we had ever taken.

At this time of year the sluicing season had begun again; the snow was melting on the moun-



A miner pours water over gravel to loosen the gold, which next falls through a screen as the box is shaken.





**Midnight on Mt. Lookout, June 1902.** The picnickers found an elk horn and wrote their names on it. Etta is in the front, in the plaid hat.

tains, and with the rainfall water was plentiful, and this means plenty to do in a placer mining camp. The dumps they had all gotten out during the winter were to be washed up; and the open cut work was in full blast. Many companies ran a day and a night shift now, it being just the same underground and so light all night. The hills now were red, purple, and gold with the beautiful wild flowers, and with plenty of fresh berries and the river open and the boats bringing in fresh supplies, we did not envy our friends back in the States of what they had to eat. The summer passed all too quickly, and in the Autumn we found ourselves debating the question whether to stay there or come outside, but affairs seemed to adjust themselves in such a way it seemed best to return, so on September 15 on board the "Thistle" we started up the Yukon River. So many were coming out now our boat was overcrowded, and the river trip was not so pleasant as going in. At Five Fingers, a place where the river is obstructed by five huge rocks, the boats have

to cable in going up stream; the passage is so narrow here they let most of the passengers off for safety, and we walked about a mile along the bank which seemed a treat to get on land and to walk on soil so seldom trod only on such occasions. The night we went through Hell's Gate, another dangerous place on the river we found a boat stranded

on the rocks, and with the natural swiftness of the river and the waves caused by this boat made it very difficult for us to get past, in doing so our boat had a rudder broken, so we were several hours in this dangerous predicament. The Captain then sent a number of

men to the shore in the life boats and by means of cables we were pulled upstream, and without further accident we reached White Horse, where we stayed all night before going over the dangerous little railroad I have before described. While on this, on crossing the Canada-Alaska border line, the whole carload of passengers burst out in the dear old familiar song "America." At Skagway the steamer Dolphin was waiting, and we took passage on her for Seattle and had a very smooth voyage. We spent a great deal of our time out on deck watching the waves, the seagulls, the porpoise following the boat watching for something to eat to be thrown out, and the many beautiful places and islands along our way, and one day while thus engaged a large whale came so near us its back was plainly visible through the water until it made a dive and went deeper under the water. We saw a great many of them spouting not far away. A beautiful sight to me was an iceberg in the distance which looked like pale green glass.

When we reached Seattle we felt like we were at home again. Here we spent two weeks, then going to San Francisco for 10 days, then to Los Angeles for a day, and from there through Arizona, New Mexico, Indian Territory, to Kansas visiting there 5 days, then home on October 27, 1902. To me this has been a wonderful experience, one which I shall never be too old to look back upon with great interest but not with unmixed pleasure for it like the gold we went to seek has its dross. ❖



**Canine pals Buck and Blackie flank their friend (probably Etta).**