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SUNDAY || FIRST PERSON

Strange sights in the Northern Lights

In the spirit of Robert Service, The Star's **Mark Richardson** travelled thousands of kilometres to take part in one of the Yukon's most disgusting rituals

A bunch of the boys were whooping it up in the Sourdough Saloon.

The kid who handles the box of toes was digging them out with a spoon.

"Which do you choose for your glass of booze?" he asked the guy from the Star.

"This big one here to go with your beer? Or the one that's the colour of tar?"

They've been pickled and dried, and kept safe inside ajar that was filled up with salt

Till the moment one's taken, and stirred but not shaken, and placed in a double of malt.

They're human remains, these ill-gotten gains, removed from real, frostbitten feet;

Donated for drinking, intended for sinking in glasses of whisky served neat.

DAWSON CITY, YUKON—This town lies on the permafrost of Canada's extreme northwest, a remote place surrounded by remote mountains, its climate so cold in the winter that the trees crack in the frigid wind with sounds like gunshots.

A few thousand people call Dawson home. There are more in the summertime — many, many more as the trailer homes and RVs roll through on the circle tour to Alaska, stopping for some gambling at Diamond Tooth Gertie's, which recalls the dizzy days of the gold rush.

But in January most of the stores are boarded up and the buildings are dark through the long nights. Only two hotels stay open, and their bars serve the miners, trappers and characters who come of an evening.

Of those two hotels, only one serves the Sourtoe, the most disgusting Canadian concoction ever swigged, chugged and, yes, heaved. Which is why I drove all the way here last year, to be grossed out like the rest.

"We'll serve you a Sourtoe if you really want," said Kyle Hammond as he checked me in at the Downtown Hotel's front desk. "Just come through to the Sourdough Saloon" — and he nodded toward an ornate wooden door off the hotel lobby, with dark leaded glass hinting. "We usually do it after 9 p.m., but are you sure you want to? It's really disgusting."

Of course, I assured him. I had driven 7,000 kilometres for this. No turning back now.

He gave me a booklet outlining the Sourtoe's history, to read in my room before going to the bar. It was *Captain Dick, living down by the crick, who bought a moonshine shack.*

He didn't look far — it was there in a jar, a toe from years way back.

It was froze one night in the bright moonlight while running from a cop.

It belonged to Otto, who drank himself blotto before Louie gave it the chop.

During prohibition, goes the story, brothers Otto and Louie Liken were being chased by the Mounties as they hauled a load of illicit rum from Dawson into Alaska. Otto got his foot wet and his toe became frostbitten. They knew that if it was left untreated it would spread gangrene into the foot so, in the middle of nowhere, Otto cracked open a bottle of his overproof hooch and drank until he was anaesthetized. Then Louie lopped the toe off with a blast from a shotgun.

For some reason the brothers kept the toe in the bottle of rum, where it sat for half a century, pickled, until their cabin was bought by "Captain" Dick Stevenson, a local entrepreneur who ran a riverboat for tourists on the Yukon River.

He found the bottle and, not long after, found himself in a Dawson City bar with a couple of friends and wondering what to do with it.

Somebody mentioned "The Ballad of the Ice-Worm Cocktail," a poem by Robert Service that tells of a British major tricked into drinking a cocktail with — he believes — an "ice worm" floating in it.

"Their bellies were a bilious blue,

their eyes a bulbous red; Their backs were grey, and gross were they, and hideous of head.

And when with gusto and a fork the barman speared one out, It must have gone four inches from its tail-tip to its snout."

Surrounded by rugged drinkers in the Dawson bar, the major is goaded into swigging back the cocktail to qualify as a real Yukoner. He doesn't know the "ice worms" were only spaghetti.

Captain Dick realized he had a winner in his bottle. He printed up some certificates, put on his captain's cap and, setting up shop at the bar of the Eldorado Hotel, plopped the pickled toe into the glass of anybody who wanted to qualify as a real Yukoner. And such is human nature — especially the nature of humans on vacation, and/or half-soused — that plenty of people were willing to give it a try. Captain Dick's only rule was that "the lips have gotta touch the toe."

Over the telephone from his home in Whitehorse, he recalls that the toe "brought a lot of people into the bar — for every one who wanted to drink the toe, there'd be two who just wanted to watch. I never got any kickbacks from the bar, but I got a lot of free drinks."

For seven years, tourists stopped by the Eldorado bar and asked for the toe in a drink, usually champagne in a beer glass. But a logbook was kept and there were plenty of exceptions: the time a woman of 84 slugged it back in a glass of 7 Up, and when a troop of boy scouts drank it with Coke. In July 1980, after a total of 725 Sourtoes had been consumed, a local placer miner fell over backwards while downing his 13th drink of the evening and accidentally swallowed the toe.

The call went out for a replacement. Eventually, an Alberta woman heard of the dilemma and donated a toe that was due to be amputated because of a corn, but it was soon lost during renovations. Not long after, a trapper from Faro donated his frostbitten big toe, and Captain Dick was back in business.

Eventually, he took his Sourtoe cocktail on the road. Every now and again somebody would swallow the toe and he'd have to find another, but somehow donations always seemed to turn up. Sometimes he'd have several toes at one time. He was even invited onto *The Tonight Show* to share it with Jay Leno, but the U.S. government balked at allowing human remains to cross the border.

Captain Dick never made much money from the toe, but it was usually good for a few bucks in a bar. He finally left Dawson in 1993 and gave his latest pickled toe to a friend, who took up the cause again in Dawson. It found a home at the Downtown Hotel, and last year its new owners bought the rights to the Sourtoe name, all the certificates and a foot's worth of blackened and putrefied toes, packed in rock salt. It was right around then that I checked in for the night.

Tip your head back and open a crack in your mouth as the booze trickles by.

But try not to swallow or the toe will then follow and inside your stomach will lie.

It's happened before, according to lore, that the toe has been gulped back and lost;

Then they'd search for another from somebody's brother whose foot fought a fight with the frost.

"I would say there must have been a couple of dozen toes, minimum, that have been The Toe so far," says Matt Van Nostrand, co-owner of the Downtown Hotel, which charges \$5 for a single shot of a drink of your choice with a human toe floating in it.

"Two were swallowed a couple of years back, and then last summer, someone chewed it. He chewed it right up and took it out of his mouth and handed it to me and it was just toast. He was a firefighter from Ontario



STAR FILE PHOTO

When the locals called him a true Yukoner for downing the drink, Mark Richardson had only one reply: "No I'm not. I'm just another idiot."

and those guys like to party. His commander found out about it and he was shipped home the next day, and we got an official apology for it. That was kind of neat. We don't hold a grudge — I'm sure he was just really drunk.

"We've had as many as 150 people do it in one night — people just line up for it. And we're very proud of it."

The hotelier reckons the club has acquired about 35,000 members since its inception. Almost 3,000 drank The Toe last year.

I stalled for time when I walked into the saloon, buying myself a beer and some drinks for two guys in thick coats at the bar.

Which begs the question: Why?

"We say that it's a way of becoming a sourdough," explains Van Nostrand. "And you know what a sourdough is? It's a person who's spent a winter in the Yukon from freeze-up to break-up... It really says you've been here and you've taken in some of the Dawson City culture."

"Mind you, it's totally disgusting... People will put it right in their mouths and push their cheek out with it and it just makes me sick. I sit there and I can't even watch — it's gross.

There are strange things done

in the midnight sun and the Sourtoe's strangest of all.

There's no time to fidget while swigging a digit that's floating around your highball.

Up here in the Yukon, while other folks look on, there's ice in the air and the snow,

But not in this bar, in this drink for the Star — there's only a black pickled toe.

I stalled for time when I walked into the saloon, buying myself a beer and some drinks for two guys in thick coats at the bar. I asked if they'd mind if the bartender put a toe in them. "Sure," said the clean-shaven — well, comparatively clean-shaven — one, "as long as I can have it in a Sambuca. I reckon I've had about 13 since I've been coming in here, so another will go down well."

Why so many? Did he like the taste?

"It's 'cause people like you keep buying me drinks if I'll do it. 'Hey, Georgia, make sure that's a Sambuca, okay?'"

Georgia Fraser, the bartender, nodded and poured the drink. Kyle wandered through from the front desk and smirked a little. "So, you going to do the toe, Mark?"

"I'll get there," I said. "Will you do one with me and these guys?"

"No way — it's disgusting," Kyle said. "It's gross."

"How can you call yourself a Yukoner?" I asked.

"I'm not — I'm from Toronto," he said. "I came here last summer to pick (more!) mushrooms and just never quite left."

He went into the back and returned with a wooden box that held some certificates, a spoon and a small Mason jar filled with salt. He flipped the lid and dug around in the white crystals. A black object came to the surface.

A dry black object. A large, dry black object. It looked like a turd. Georgia pulled her head back in an involuntary recoil.

He dug around some more and pulled out some smaller, more shrivelled objects, but we all knew it would have to be the big one.

"It's better in Sambuca," said the guy at the end, looking past it to the glass as Kyle lifted the big toe, as big a toe as any grown man can possess, and plopped it into the liquor with a little splash. Georgia slid the glass down the wooden bar, and the guy lifted it straight to his lips and drank it down in one shot. The toe went right into his mouth. He pushed it back out between his lips, took it with his fingers and dropped it back into the empty glass.

"Want to buy me another one?" he asked.

No — it was time. Georgia rinsed off the toe and plopped it into my double shot of Yukon Jack whisky. All eyes were on me. I thought of Robert Service's British major, perhaps in this very bar:

"Yet on him were a hundred eyes, though no one spoke aloud,

For hushed with expectation was the waiting, watching crowd.

The Major's fumbling hand went forth — the gang prepared to cheer;

The Major's falt'ring hand went back, the mob prepared to jeer"

It's difficult to drink a drink without looking at it. I raised the glass toward my face and stared at the floating black toe. This close, its long nail looked hideously untrimmed. Its severed end was a hardened mass of dark folds, with the bone barely visible.

I raised it closer. The warm smell of the whiskey was reas-

suring; the gruesome sight of its cargo was not. I put the glass to my mouth and tipped it gently. The alcohol washed against my lips, clean and strong. The toe sat in the bottom of the glass and didn't move. I tipped it more and let the drink flow in past my teeth. The toe didn't budge.

"You can drink it fast, or drink it slow, but the lips have gotta touch the toe," recited Kyle helpfully.

"I hate watching this," said Georgia.

"You shoulda had a Sambuca," said the guy at the end of the bar.

And then, with the glass tipped back for the last of the drink to splash in, the toe lost its sticky grip on the base and tumbled down and bumped against my mouth. The surprise as I felt it touch made me gasp, just enough to open my mouth a little more and for the toe to wash inside, past my teeth and up against my tongue.

"Oh gross," said Georgia. "I hate it when that happens."

It tasted like nothing at all — like a lump of plastic. I picked it out quickly and dropped it in the glass and ordered another beer, quickly, to rinse everything out.

"Now you're a sourdough, Mark," said Kyle.

"No I'm not," I said. "I'm just another idiot. But that wasn't too bad at all."

These are the simple facts of the case, and I guess I ought to know. I drank the glass with the Yukon Jack and the blackened, pickled toe.

I'm not that smart, though I've got the heart of a guy who'll try anything quick,

So I'll toast him now and give a bow to the Yukon's Captain Dick.

See video of Mark Richardson drinking his Sourtoe at thestar.com.

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