

Diamond Tooth Gertie: From Dance Hall to Prayer Hall

Michael and Kathy Gates © April 2014

Diamond Tooth Gertie's: Canada's first legalized gambling establishment; named in honour of the famous dance hall queen. With a sparkling diamond placed between her two front teeth, she mined the miners, who parted with their hard-earned gold in exchange for her affections. That's the way she is portrayed.

Today, bedecked in fabulous eye-catching gowns, Miss Diamond Tooth Gertie entertains thousands of visitors in the non-profit gambling establishment in the heart of the Klondike.

But who exactly was Diamond Tooth Gertie? Was she the dance hall queen of legend?

Ella Lung Martinsen, in her classic narrative *Trail to the North Star Gold* describes her father's encounter with Klondike Kate Rockwell and Cad Wilson on the road to Hunker Creek the summer of 1899, where they were to perform with Diamond Tooth Gertie and the Oregon Mare. But Rockwell and Wilson never shared a stage together; Rockwell didn't even arrive in the Yukon until 1900 – a year after Wilson had left.

In Martinsen's account, Gertie says that Rockwell is "plumb crazy" to fall for a "patent leather kid" by the name of Alexander Pantages, who will love her and leave her. But that exchange could never have taken place in 1899 – before Rockwell even arrived in the Klondike. The entire encounter with the dance hall queens on the road to Hunker Creek is fictitious.

Diamond Tooth Gertie – the legend - like Klondike Kate, is a latter-day phenomenon, created years after the gold rush had long expired.

Gertie Lovejoy actually existed, but our search to find reference to her in the newspapers of the time does not substantiate the legend. The papers covered the theatre circuit in Dawson with great detail, yet her name is not found mentioned as a headline entertainer. She was not listed in any theatrical advertisements, or reviews of the stage attractions of the day that we could find.

We do know this much: *The Klondike Nugget* newspaper reported that she was seen entering the Phoenix dance hall on the evening of April 6, 1899, on the arm of US Consul James McCook. They shared a bottle of wine, after which McCook embarked on the most notorious binge of the early days. There is no further reference

in this article to Gertie, who seems to have been ditched for another dance hall girl named Pearl Hall.

Gertie cropped up in January of 1900 when she lost \$2,000 worth of personal belongings, barely escaping a fire in the Monte Carlo with her life. She was obviously doing well, but there is no explanation of precisely *what* she was doing.

She eventually married Charles W.C. Tabor, Dawson City's most prominent lawyer. Laura Berton, in her book, *I Married the Klondike*, describes her in later years, attending one of Martha Black's evening social functions, as: "...a demure little woman, quite pretty and very self-effacing. She had little to say, but when she did speak, the famous diamond could be seen glittering between the two front teeth. "

The Blacks were always faithful to their political allies, and Charles Tabor shared Black's maritime origin, as well as his politics. Mrs. Black may also have enjoyed breaking social convention by inviting a former dance hall girl to one of her social functions.

Beyond that, it has been difficult to find hard facts.

However, in response to a casual question about Gertie posed by a staff member at the Yukon Archives, Kathy decided to investigate further. After searching through at least 5 huge collections of online digital newspapers, she located two very small clippings. The "Eureka" moment happened within a five-line clipping from an obscure newspaper article, dated 1915, referring to a visit by a Mrs. C.W.C. Tabor to her parents in Pepperell, Massachusetts. Kathy sent an inquiry to the Pepperell Public Library, and received a reply from Barbara Smith, a member of the local historical society, and volunteer at the library.

A self-confessed family Genealogist, Smith began digging into the community archives. She indicated that no one was aware that Pepperell had a famous connection to the Klondike Gold Rush. Thus began a chain of correspondence between them that has pieced together much new information about Diamond Tooth Gertie Lovejoy.

Here are details of Gertie's real life.

Gertie was in fact, **Mary Isabel Lovejoy**, second daughter of Daniel and Angela Lovejoy of Harbor Street in Pepperell, Massachusetts. She was one of 5 children. She was born on July 7th 1874. The Lovejoy ancestral Harbor Street home still stands today. Her father Daniel was a farmer and quite possibly was also a stone mason.

The “Lovejoy Genealogy” dates back to 1490, in England. It reveals that Mary Isobel appears to have married one Fred Ellis, February 2, 1896. (There is a question mark beside the marriage date.) In December of 1900, the *Pepperell Advertiser* reports that “Mrs. Hattie Burrille of New York City and Mrs. M. Isabel Ellis of Dawson City, Yukon are visiting their parents.....”

We don’t know whether Fred Ellis died, or if they divorced, but we know from the marriage certificate that Ms. Lovejoy was joined to Charles C.W. Tabor in holy matrimony in Portland, Oregon, November 7, 1901. The document lists her last name as Lovejoy, not Ellis, raising curious questions about the first marriage. The census of 1911 shows the Tabors residing on Queen Street in Dawson City.

It is interesting to note that Portland was founded by two men, one of whom was Asa Lovejoy, who was born one town over from Pepperell. There is also a Mount Tabor.

Charles William Clifton Tabor was the pre-eminent lawyer in Dawson City during the early years of the twentieth century. He was born in Fredericton, New Brunswick, on August 4th 1863. His father was a captain in a British regiment stationed there. He arrived in the Klondike in 1898 as a solicitor for the Bank of North America. He immersed himself in the life of his chosen community and became President and was an avid curler of the Dawson Curling club; He was also a member of the Yukon Order of Pioneers, the Eagles and the Moose. He served as the representative for North Dawson in the Yukon territorial council from 1912 to 1915. Tabor died in the fire of the Yukonia Hotel in February, 1917, while his wife was Outside. She was the sole beneficiary of his estate, which was valued at less than \$15,000. In these documents, she is identified as Mae Isobel Tabor.

Tabor was honoured by flying the flags of Dawson City at half mast. A letter confirming his elevation to King’s Counsel was received from Ottawa just days after his death.

In May of 1920, in East Oakland County, California, Isobel Tabor married Stephen C. Hart of San Francisco, whose occupation was hotel steward. The marriage certificate and newspaper announcement list Hart as being 35 years of age, and Isobel being 32. In truth, she was 11 years older than Hart. Isobel was married to Stephen until his death 35 years later.

Gertie/Isobel, joined The Mother Church of Christian Science in 1926, and became a Christian Science Practitioner in 1928. She remained so until she died in San Mateo, California, in 1957. Though it is often stated in print that she was 90 years of age, she was in fact 83 years old. And that seems to be the story of her life – often misrepresented, often misquoted, definitely misunderstood and mythologized.

What we know about the legendary Diamond Tooth Gertie Lovejoy is that she was in Dawson City during the gold rush and inspired the community to name Canada's first legalised Gambling Casino, after her memory. According to most reports she was wearing a diamond between her two front teeth during her Klondike stay.

What we don't really know about her is what she was really like, and what happened to her over the course of her life. The records suggest that once she married Tabor, she lived a rather conventional life, and after Tabor's death, she remained in the San Francisco area until she passed away 40 years later. She left no descendants as far as we know. More research may reveal other details of her life.

Perhaps Kathy and her fellow history hunter Barbara Smith will succeed in finding Gertie's personal papers, or other evidence of how she lived her life. Perhaps we may even learn the fate of the diamond-studded smile that made her a legend of the Klondike.