

## The Men Who Ate Their Boots By Taylor Rizk

The journal was sitting in front of me. It was cold in the tent, and I hadn't eaten in over a week. The gold sat slumped on either side of me, but it was useless out here. I waited for the water to boil.

I grew up on northern stories. Hunters, explorers, men who ate their boots. It was always a grand fantasy until I came across the journal of my great-great-great-grandfather. The family story was that he went to Dawson City during the gold rush and returned clinging to life, never to leave his hometown. He claimed to have a fortune in the north, but nobody believed him. He had suffered a stroke and was escorted, barely conscious, back to his family. Everyone thought that the claims of striking it rich were a fantasy.

The journal recorded his prospecting in great detail. He claimed to have a cache in the woods, buried before the winter set in so that he wouldn't be tempted to indulge during the long, cold months. The first entry after the accident was a revelation that someone needed to return to claim the gold. Years later he left a pleading note should any of his descendants read the journal, they should attempt to find the gold. As a final memento, he bound the pages in leather salvaged from his old prospecting boots. The story was gripping. I slipped the journal into my backpack and made plans.

Arriving in Dawson City, I drove out to a spot near one of the journal's identifiable landmarks. Stepping off the highway and into the trees was like stepping back in time. There was a heavy spring rain, but I was carefree. Midway through the day I crossed a shallow creek trickling through a deep, wide, dry riverbed. I wondered if the river source had been dammed higher up or diverted. The rain continued pouring and I trudged through to the other side. I walked until the sun began to drop behind the trees.

The following morning, I left most of my gear slung in a tree while I continued on to the cache location. After several hours I came across a rock cairn in the woods. Digging under this I found two fifty pound bags of gold. I was ecstatic. I wasted much of the day staring at the fortune. With a bag in each hand, I traveled slowly. I needed the light from my headlamp to make it back to camp.

Approaching the campsite, I turned from side to side looking for the tent. I couldn't see it. Walking closer I saw it crushed against the ground, fly ripped open. I dropped the gold and ran towards it. Something had knocked it over, damaging the frame. I stood up and looked towards where I had tied my food sack. Nothing. I looked along the ground and could see the remains of the rope which had held the bag, tattered on the forest floor. I was exhausted, but panicked over the lost supplies and more concerned with whatever took it. A moose could've run over my tent. With torn rope and missing food, I was thinking bear. I had bearspray but nothing else. *Stupid*, I thought to myself. I did a short walk around the area, calling out loudly. No signs. Around 2am I decided there was nothing more to do. I set the tent upright and placed the bags of gold inside

with the sleeping bag. I crawled in and stripped off my clothes, soaked in sweat by the hiking and digging. I tried to sleep.

I woke tired and hungry, and took stock of the situation. With my bag gone I lost my cookstove, clothes, and food. I went to the tree where my bag had been and spotted my pot laying on its side. I could find nothing else.

It was still raining. I was miserable. I cut my losses and headed for the car. It would be a full day of hiking to get back, and I had both bags of gold to haul. I fashioned a sling out of the remaining rope so the gold hung in a bag at each hip. The dispersed weight was much easier to walk with. I made good time as I hiked back towards the creek.

The rain never let up. It had been pounding for three days. I didn't think much of it aside from the dreariness, but my heart sank as I neared the creek. The ground squished under my boots. Two days prior it was mossy, damp. Now, my boots began to sink in to the top. All the while a rushing sound was growing over the patter of rain. When I reached the edge of the treeline I could see it clearly in front of me. The trickle of a creek had grown into a full-fledged river. It had jumped the banks and was flooding the surrounding forest. I knew that it would be up to my chin at least. If I sank in it would be over my head. With the gold weighing me down, one wrong step and I would be swept away. I began to pace up and down the bank, looking for a place to cross. I was panicking. No food, no change of clothes. I walked for an hour upstream. I walked back. It was getting dark. I had to hike back over the floodplain to reach a dry spot in the forest.

I walked back across the swamp, dejected and thoroughly angry. It was 11pm. I had a granola bar in my pocket, and my hunger got the best of me. I ate it without considering how long I might have to hold out for. I slunk back into the tent and spent another wet night in my sleeping bag.

The rain still hadn't let up the next day. I headed to the river to fill my pot with water. I walked along the riverbank, in the opposite direction I from the day before. There were no crossings. I called out. Silence. I began collecting the driest branches I could find on the way back to camp. I made a fire in a dry spot near the tent. I tied the fly between trees to keep the rain from putting the fire out. It kept the smoke in and I sat tending the fire while my eyes burned. I boiled water, but with nothing to cook I just waited for it to cool to a drinkable temperature. I sat under the tarp for several hours, sipping hot water. I was able to build the fire up to a point where I could take off my clothes and dry them and still be warm. It was a cruel comfort. I made another foray to the river. I called out to no one. The rain didn't stop.

The days wore on. I knew that my chances of getting out dropped with each day. Panic would get me nowhere, but it was difficult to do anything else. My body was beginning to weaken with no food. The weather remained terrible. I began re-reading the journal to take my mind off things.

I was midway through the entries again when a thought struck me. It made my stomach churn, but I couldn't put it out of my head. I read about life after the accident, his safe and steady job. All the while the thought gnawed at me as I wished to gnaw something, anything. I walked to the river. I took off my boots and pants and walked into the river up to my knees to see how strong

the current was. The water was frigid, fast, and still far too wide to cross safely. I walked back to shore and put my clothes back on. I thought of the hot water I would have back at camp. I wished it were hot soup. I shook my head.

The next day I followed the same routine. While along the riverside, I made up my mind. I needed to eat. I groaned thinking of the legendary outdoorsmen grew up on. I returned to camp with solitary purpose. I looked at the journal, devouring the words again and again. When water was boiling I spread the journal out on the ground. I cut a corner off of the back flap. I picked it up and held it to my nose. There was a smell of old leather. I threw it into the pot. I watched it dance in the boiling water and decided that wouldn't be enough. I cut a strip off the back flap and added it to the pot. I waited. How long do you cook boot leather for? I decided it was a cook-to-taste type of dish. Eventually I took the pot off the fire and allowed it to cool until I could fish out the leather strip with the tip of the knife. The water was stained a murky brown. I focused on the leather. It was still hot, but not too hot. I picked it up with two fingers and brought it to my lips. The smell was still there, but now it was wet. I closed my eyes and pretended it was beef jerky and put one end between my teeth, ripping it. The wet leather taste coated the inside of my mouth as I chewed it into pieces small enough to swallow. It was disgusting, but my stomach felt more full than it had in days. I took another bite. I wanted to wash my mouth out with water, but the water in the pot was flavoured with leather. I continued chewing until I had eaten the entire strip. It was more than had been in my stomach in days. I took a sip of the water to wash it down. *Disgusting*. I stood up and moved around, waiting to see if I would throw up. Aside from the bitter aftertaste, I felt fine. I walked back to the river for some fresh water.

The next day I did the same thing for dinner, making a snack out of a leather strip. I did this every day until the bindings of the journal were undone and the pages were packed naked into the bottom of my bag. I kept a strip of leather uncooked in case I needed an emergency snack, but otherwise finished the entire thing.

I sat there shivering in the tent with a belly full of boot leather, and began to laugh.