

The Klondike Baby - Part 1

The death of Jesse Edgren, former Monroe resident, was reported in the Monroe Evening Times on June 3, 1915 in a very short obituary. But the headlines five days later caught my attention - "Father's death recalls story of Klondike baby" and "Little daughter was born far above the Arctic Circle." So I set out to find out more about this man's story.

Jesse Lewis Edgren was born in Wisconsin (probably in Monroe) in 1874 to John and Amy Edgren. John, a native of Sweden, was a miner who had lived in Wiota. The 1880 census showed that the couple, ages 72 and 40, was living in Monroe with their two children, Carrie, 7, and Jesse, 6.

The family home, located on the southeast corner of 18th Avenue and 9th Street, burned to the ground in the very early morning of May 8, 1886. The fire made its way from the stable to the house; the two buildings were connected. The contents of the barn were all destroyed, including a span of work horses, wagon, carriage, cutter, sleigh, implements, hay, grain, etc. Fortunately, a colt and cow escaped from the fire. There was \$3,500 insurance on the building and contents. The loss exceeded that amount by \$600. Within a month, work had begun on a new residence on the same site.

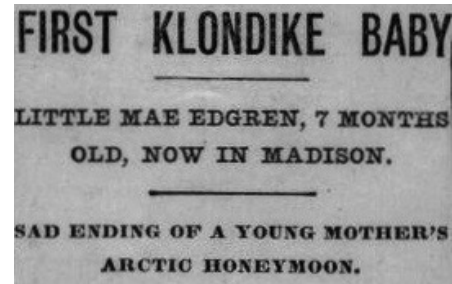
Sadly, the father passed away in January 1888, leaving his widow with two children who were 12 and 14 years old. Jesse and Carrie were raised in Monroe until their mother moved them to Madison sometime after Carrie graduated from high school in 1891. According to a University of Wisconsin directory from 1897, both children graduated in 1896. Jesse was listed as an attorney in 1897.

Jesse and Lepha Mae Bennett were married in a quiet ceremony on Saturday evening, February 26, 1898 in Madison. She had spent a few years in the pharmacy program at the University, which is probably where they met. Only immediate relatives and intimate friends were in attendance in the rooms that were decorated with jonquils and bride roses. The bride wore white silk taffeta and carried English violets. The couple left for the "Alaskan gold fields to seek their fortune," that evening on the 10:45 Northwestern Railroad for Seattle. They would then "take passage for the Klondike." For months Jesse had "been training a number of dogs for use in carrying provisions over the snow bound mountains of Alaska."

Lepha was the daughter of Civil War Veteran, Captain James Bennett, and his wife. Excerpts from the letters that she wrote to her parents later that year were printed in the Portage Daily Democrat on October 11. Letha was in Dawson City, located at the junction of the Yukon and Klondike Rivers, and wrote on August 29 that there was frost in the air and that the leaves were already turning. She also wrote that when the snowflakes started falling they would be "a community apart from the rest of the world."

In the same letter, she shared that, "Cinnamon, Silver-Tips and Rocky Mt. Bears are plentiful here." She shared that five miners shared a tent along Hunker Creek, about 40 miles from her. Three of them left with all of the firearms; the two still in camp had none. The two were awakened one morning by something lifting the flap. When the man opened the flap to throw a stick, he saw the huge Silver-Tip, one of the most savage bears. One of the men grabbed a sack of sugar and threw a handful at the bear. While the bear was licking up the sugar, the other man grabbed an axe and broke the bear's neck. She also mentioned that another man on Dominion Creek was not as fortunate. He was hugged to death by a Silver-Tip.

Jesse wrote a letter to the Bennetts on September 11 in which he said, "Up on the mountain, Glacier Hill, the wind is howling and screeching. Black, rolling clouds are tossing above. Still, in our little cabin we are warm and happy as if we were sitting on a sofa in the parlor at home, except that all of those that we love are not with us. In front of me on the top of the cupboard shelves I can see the following canned goods: Tomatoes, cabbage, corn, oysters - the beefsteak and onions are all gone, but there is plenty down town. We have some buckwheat now from which we make 'skookum' pancakes. We are also the proud possessors of a broom and a red table-cloth. After living in a tent so long, a cabin seems



This newspaper headline, which was copied from findagrave.com, appears to have appeared in a Milwaukee newspaper in August 1899. Mae Edgren's father, Jesse, had roots in Monroe and moved his new bride to the Yukon for their honeymoon.



A sketch of the Klondike Baby from a Madison newspaper in 1899.

like a palace. We are getting along very nicely. Our rich claim is still somewhere in the future, but is sure to come. A gold mine is not the only way of making money here, however.”

He went on to say that winter was approaching and that this meant work for hundreds of idle men. “You see the mines are so far from Dawson that it is such a hard matter to get provisions to them in the summer time, so all the grub is taken out with the dog-teams in winter. Then all the mines are running in full blast, and most everyone has money. The laborers in the mines receive from \$10 to \$15 a day. It is very hard work, however, and they will earn their money. By far the most profitable work outside of the fellow who has a rich mine is the income of a dog team. A good dog team is of unknown value. It was a lucky day when I brought in the dogs instead of selling them. Of course driving the dog team at 20 degrees or 30 degrees below zero is not the pleasantest work possible. But there are quite a few road houses along the trail where one can stop in to get warm and a bit to eat.”

More from that letter and the rest of their lives next week.