

**TRAGEDY & RICHES:
The Story of John “Cariboo” Cameron**

*In '63 I left my hame,
In that same year I bought a claim
Frae Cameron Jock o' Canada –
As smart a lads ye ever saw,
Wha's greatest faut was nane uncommon,
A gae strong likin' for a woman.
James Anderson, 1866*

Perhaps one of the most pathetic love stories in the early history of British Columbia is the woeful saga of John Angus “Cariboo” Cameron whose wife had four funerals, two caskets and three burials...

Cameron was born in Charlottenburgh in 1820 and raised on the family farm in Glengarry County, Canada West, a United Empire Loyalist settlement to which his family had retreated during the American War of Independence.

In 1852, his eyes set on the western horizon, John set out with his brothers, Allan and Daniel for California and the gold rush there. They were lucky and stayed six years making a respectable sum. In 1858 they heard of gold on Fraser's River and headed north to mine. Once again luck was on their side and the three brothers returned to Cornwall with some \$20,000 in gold.

It was here in Cornwall that John Angus Cameron married his childhood sweetheart Margaret Sophia Groves, a farmer's daughter twelve years his junior. It was soon after their marriage that news began filtering east of the rich diggings in ‘Cariboo’ and of the fabulous fortunes being made in the interior of British Columbia. Cameron, not one to be left behind, struck west again, this time with his new bride and their 4 month old baby girl, Alice.

The trip from Canada West to the Fort Victoria via Panama was a long and arduous journey. Alice became sick; less than a week after stepping off the *Brother John* in Victoria she died. The Camerons were heartbroken but determined to press on to the goldfields.

Robert Stevenson, an old friend of John's from Glengarry County, managed to set up credit for the Camerons at the Hudson's Bay Co. to the tune of \$2000. John used the \$2000 dollars to stock up on candles which he brought with him to Barkerville and later sold for a profit of \$10,000!

Much like Billy Barker, Cameron first staked a claim on upper Williams Creek but encouraged by the success of Ned Stout's claim lower in the valley he staked another claim half a mile below Barker's shaft with his wife, Richard Rivers, Allan MacDonald,

James and Charles Glendenning and Robert Stevenson. It is interesting to note that Mrs. Cameron was the holder of Miner's Licence No. 7598 and was probably the only woman in the Cariboo at that time to hold such a document.

A short three weeks later, however, Stevenson had transferred to Sophia his entire interest in the Cameron claims "below the canon." Chas. Glendenning had sold out his interests to Cameron for \$2,000 leaving the Camerons a majority interest in the claim. Later records indicate that R. Stevenson purchased "one full share" for \$5000 and "one-eighth of 700 feet" for \$15,000,. on August 25, 1862

The shaft did not pay off quickly and as winter drew nearer the miners began to wonder if they had the right location. Meanwhile the Camerons had another child; but it was stillborn and Sophia became ill...never to recover.

"Mrs. Cameron died at 3 a.m. on October 23, 1862. Richfield was the name of the mining town where she passed away. Cameron and I were the only persons present at the time. Poor Cameron! The morning Mrs. Cameron died was intensely cold, the thermometer standing at thirty degrees before zero, and a wind blowing at the rate of sixty miles an hour. As there were no undertakers in Cariboo, I went away and engaged Griffin to make a coffin, and Henry Lightfoot of Vankleek Hill made the case." *R. Stevenson.*

Of the five thousand people on the creek in the summer of '62 only ninety-seven remained to be at her funeral that October.

John was shattered. He threw himself into work at the mine and vowed that come spring and better fortune he would carry out the last wish of Sophia; to be buried at "home" in Canada West. Her body was placed in a tin casket inside a wooden coffin and buried temporarily under an abandoned cabin in Richfield.

Exactly two months later, three days before Christmas, the Cameron Co. struck paydirt...

"On December 22 we struck it very rich at twenty-two feet. Dick Rivers was in the shaft and William Halpenny and I were at the windlass. Cameron had just come down from Richfield to see how we were getting on, when Rivers called up from the bottom "Cameron or Stevenson - come down here at once - the place is yellow with gold! Look here boys!" *R. Stevenson*

By the end of February, Cameron a wealthy but grieving man decided to head for Victoria. He offered twelve dollars a day and a \$2,000 bonus to any man who would help him make the trip down. Twenty-two men signed up. Their journey took them through virtual wilderness: snowdrifts up to twelve feet deep, mountains, dense forest, often without a trail, with temperatures as cold as fifty below zero; dragging the coffin on an awkward toboggan heaped with blankets, food and 50 lb. of gold. To add to their formidable task was the ever-present danger of smallpox.

On March 7, 1863, having travelled approximately 600 miles, they finally reached their destination. Here Sophia had a well-attended funeral, was preserved in alcohol in preparation for the long voyage back east, and re-buried.

Cameron returned to Williams Creek and bought out the Glendennings and two adjacent claims, giving him a full five shares in the Company. The Cameron Co. mined vigorously from April until October of 1863. The gold was being mined not by the ounce but by the pan. By October, Cameron was ready to leave and he with Stevenson and eight horses laden with gold left Cariboo for Victoria. In total, Cameron had taken out the equivalent of \$5 million in today's dollars and the Cameron Co. claim had proved to be the richest in the entire colony.

A town had grown up around the claim and was christened Cameron's Town or Cameronton. It was situated just north of Barkerville, below the cemetery.

Sophia was exhumed and continued on her journey; via boat to San Francisco, Panama and New York; where customs officials were dubious as to the contents of the sealed coffin due to its massive weight. Nonetheless, by December of 1863, after completing the last leg of the journey by rail, the coffin finally reached Canada West. Sophia was again buried, in the family plot in Cornwall.

At home, Cameron was generous with his money. Two brothers received \$20,000 while two others, Alex and Roderick, who had actually come to Cariboo and helped John mine were given \$40,000 and a farm each. Cameron himself built himself a beautiful estate on the banks of the St. Lawrence seaway which he called Fairfield after his grandfather's former estate in New York state. In 1865, 'Cariboo' Cameron married Christianne Wood, the daughter of a respectable neighbour and for a while they lived the good life.

However, rumours continued to grow. Why had John spent so much effort bringing Sophia back? Some speculated that he had sold her into slavery and the coffin was filled with reserve gold. Cameron tried to ignore the rumours but when a New York paper printed a story stating that Sophia had escaped slavery and had returned to Fairfield Estate he could ignore no longer. Sophia's parents were summoned from Ottawa and the coffin was for the fourth time exhumed and the alcohol drained. Sophia, preserved in the alcohol, was identified by her parents and laid to rest for the final time in the Salem Cemetery near Cornwall.

In 1886, his fortune reduced, 'Cariboo' Cameron and his second wife returned to Cariboo to seek further wealth. Upon arrival Cameron was shocked; the town of Barkerville was a shell of it's former self, Cameronton just a few ramshackle buildings. Soon after he arrived in Barkerville he suffered a massive stroke and died, some friends say of a broken heart. On November 7, 1888 he was carried up the hill and buried in the same cemetery he had located for young Peter Gibson twenty-five years earlier.

Harry Jones, a Welsh miner, said this about Cameron's funeral "I went over from Van Winkle to attend his funeral. There was a big crowd. But there would have been more had he been rich. It is that way."