The lady in question was Bridget Aylward (nee Mannion), whose intrepid spirit took her from her beloved Rosmuc, in Galway to the wild frontiers of the Yukon and back again.

Bridget, born on 1st February 1865, was one of at least six children (Thomas, Colman, Mary, Bartly and Catherine) born to Peter Mannion and Bridget Connelly between the years 1856 and 1878 at Turlough, Rosmuc, County Galway. She emigrated from Ireland c. 1885, travelling first to relatives in St. Paul's, Minnesota. By 1889, Bridget was working as housekeeper for Seattle Pioneer Henry Yesler, before settling in Chicago, where she became cook to the wealthy family of Portus B. Weare, head of the North American Trading and Transportation Company which operated merchandise and transportation facilities in the Yukon. In 1892 her employer held a dinner party for Captain John J. Healy, an Irish born adventurer and his wife Bella.

Healy was a well known figure among the pioneers of the ‘untrodden west’. Prospector, businessman, and one time sheriff of Chouteau County, Montana, he was a terror to outlaws and it was said that no bandit was ever ‘quick enough to get the drop on Johnny Healy’.

Over dinner, Healy and Weare discussed their latest business venture, the establishment of a new trading post near Forty Mile Creek, a gold rush town on the Yukon River.

Gold Rush At Forty Mile

In the 1870’s and early 1880’s, miners and prospectors began travelling to the Yukon hoping to make their fortune. When he learned of the Fortymile Creek gold strike, an entrepreneurial prospector named Arthur Harper opened a trading post there to serve the prospectors and miners and by 1882, there was a small settlement there.

Fortymile grew rapidly, and by the early 1890’s, it was a busy community with 200 dwellings and a commercial area, which included a barbershop, opera house, and cigar factory. It also had six saloons – the liquor flowed freely at Forty Mile - dance halls and a theatre. Law and order was maintained by the miners themselves, who held regular meetings to lay down the law, there being no police force there at the time. Punishments ranged from whipping to banishment.

Difficulty in getting supplies to the Yukon had meant that the Alaska Commercial Company had a virtual monopoly in the Yukon River area and the prospectors had many complaints about the quality and prices of supplies. The bacon was in slabs three feet long, all of which was yellow and it was called “Yard Bacon.” The flour was mouldy and the rice was lumpy. The Yukon was ripe for a little competition.

Whether it was the prospect of becoming wealthy or her innate sense of adventure, Bridget became determined to go to Alaska and persuaded the Healy’s to offer her a job as Mrs Healy’s maid. In the summer of 1892, the party left Seattle for the Yukon, but the river was already beginning to freeze over and they spent their first winter at Nulato, - a Russian settlement. The following summer Bridge’s employer established his new trading post at Fort Cudahy across the Fortymile River from Harper’s trading post, named after the owner of The Cudahy Meat Company of Chicago, one of his business associates.

On July 28, 1897, the New York Times printed a letter entitled ‘Word from the Klondike’

"Yours of April 16 reached me about the middle of September. There is a mail contract for this place but it is by guess or by God that you get a letter and we have to pay a dollar per letter. My wife has left here for a trip to Ireland. She carries with her 150 nuggets of gold, averaging one ounce apiece which she picked up out here herself “

Mrs Ethel Berry, the ‘bride of the Klondike’, gave the advice to women considering travelling to Alaska to ‘stay away – it’s no place for a woman’. Conditions were extreme for prospectors and especially so for women. Log cabin furniture consisted of a bed and a stove. There were none of the comforts of home, ‘when a bath was required the ice was melted, water heated and the same pan that was used for washing gold was used as a bath’. When the household chores were completed a popular pastime for women was to hunt the dumps for nuggets or pan gold themselves. But food and clothing was expensive – Mrs Berry spoke of paying $6 a yard for dress goods and $300 for having a skirt made up.

The only water source was snow or ice. All food was frozen and had to be thawed before cooking. The diet of canned and dried food was ‘tiresome’ with fresh meat occasionally, supplied by the native Indians and fresh berries in season. Bread usually consisted of “sourdough” a mixture of fermented flour and water that Klondike stampedes carried with them ready to cook. Eventually, “sourdough” became the term used to describe the miners themselves as “one who had been in the country long enough to see the ice form in the fall and break up in the spring.”

Poor living conditions and a lack of fresh fruit and vegetables created serious health problems and anaemia, rheumatism, TB and bronchitis were common. During wintertime - December to April - there was usually only four hours of daylight. However, snowstorms of great severity could occur any time from September to May. Daily temperatures during winter remained below freezing and could go as low as minus 55 degrees. Summer meant up to twenty hours of
daylight and temperatures of 60-70 degrees and countless mosquitoes.

**Love and Marriage**

As the only single white woman in the area, Bridget received a lot of attention from the miners. In the mining camps, however rough, women of good repute were accorded the highest deference. By the winter of 1894-95 there were only twenty eight white women living in the Yukon amongst one thousand men. Unsurprisingly, Bridget received 150 proposals of marriage before she had got fifty miles up the Yukon, but it was Edward Aylward who would capture Bridget's heart. Edward (or Frank) Aylward was born in Kilkenny in November 1849. His mother was Bridget Grant. He emigrated to the USA in 1867 settling first in California before travelling to the Yukon. North-west of Juneau there is a lake which early miners called Aylward Lake after Edward who had staked mining claims nearby in 1884. It was later renamed Auke Lake. Edward and Bridget were married in 1894 – the first wedding to take place in Forty Mile. Bridget worked alongside Edward until 1896 when she announced her intention of returning to Ireland to visit her family.

Bridget’s return voyage from the goldfields to Seattle appears to be partially documented by another Yukon pioneer, Anna De Graf, in her diary: “There was an Irish girl in the bunk above mine who was very seasick and... implored the captain to stop the boat and let me get off”. She had been a servant in the family of a storekeeper at Forty Mile and married a miner who “...struck it rich”. Anna De Graf described how Bridget longed to be back in Ireland where “she could have fresh milk once more before she died, for she had been living on the canned variety so long in Alaska. She was... going back to Ireland to visit her people”. She had with her a “…black fox skin which her husband had killed and she said she was going to sell it and take her sister back to Alaska with her”.

Returning in Triumph – Queen of Alaska

A Seattle newspaper dated 3rd September 1896 carried an article about Bridget calling her the ‘Queen of Alaska’\(^\text{13}\). It recounted Bridget’s meeting with her former employer Portus Weare. Now no longer a penniless Irish cook but ‘a woman of stylish appearance in silk skirts and primrose gloves’\(^\text{14}\) whose husband was panning a mine worth $50,000 a month.

Following her return from Ireland, Bridget and Frank lived in Capitol Hill, Seattle. According to the US Federal Census of 1900 Bridget’s sister Katherine was also living with them. Bridget’s interest in the Yukon continued. She was an active participant in the activities of the Yukon Order of Pioneers\(^\text{15}\). Bridget was named ‘Queen of Alaska’ at the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition in 1909. She was also a member of the Sourdough Stampeed Association whose records proudly record that she was the ‘first white girl up the Yukon River’\(^\text{16}\).

Her sister Katherine married James Hatchett, a Seattle neighbour. Tragedy struck when Katherine’s infant son Edward died in 1902 aged only 3 days, followed by her husband James shortly after in 1904. Bridget’s beloved husband Edward died on 29th March 1914 in Seattle and in 1919 she received bad news from Ireland that her mother was dying and she applied for a passport\(^\text{17}\) to return home. On her return to Seattle in 1920 she was accompanied by her niece Mary Keane, daughter of her sister Mary. In 1922 another niece of Edward’s, Nellie Cullen, came to join them on Capitol Hill. Both girls settled permanently in Seattle.

**Return to Rosmuc**

In 1931 her nephew James Hatchett, a newspaper reporter, died and her beloved sister Katherine died two years later. Following their deaths Bridget longed for home. She acquired property in Rosmuc\(^\text{18}\) and eventually returned home to Ireland in 1948.

Bridget died at her beloved Turlough, Rosmuc, Co. Galway in January 1958, just weeks short of her 94th birthday. She is buried with her mother in Cill Eoin graveyard\(^\text{21}\). Even in death her generous spirit lived on, and apart from bequests to family, neighbours and the local church, she set up a trust fund for the education of one or more children of the labouring and farming classes... attending the National Schools in the Parish of Rosmuck\(^\text{22}\). Biorn siúlach scéalach - The traveller has tales to tell!

**ENDNOTES**

1 Parish Registers, National Library of Ireland
3 Leonard, John W. The Goldfields of the Klondike, 1897 A.N. Marquis & Co. p.149
4 A CKRW Yukon Nugget by Les McLaughlin
5 A CKRW Yukon Nugget
6 A CKRW Yukon Nugget
7 Leonard, John W. The Goldfields of the Klondike, 1897 A.N. Marquis & Co
8 Gates, Michael Gold at Forty Mile Creek, Early days in the Yukon UBC Press Vancouver 1994
9 Leonard, John W. The Goldfields of the Klondike, 1897 A.N. Marquis & Co
10 1900 United States Federal Census
11 1900 United States Federal Census
12 1900 United States Federal Census
13 1900 United States Federal Census
16 Leonard, John W. same
17 Rudolf Murphy, Clare and Haigh, Jane G.Gold Rush Women Alaska Northwest Books 1997
19 US Passport Application 1919
20 Cancellation Valuation Books
21 Paddy McGrath, a neighbour of Bridget Aylward in Rosmuc
22 Will of Bridget Aylward, National Archives of Ireland, 6th March 1956