

# A Thousand Kisses Through the Wind: Rebecca Schuldenfrei's Letters From the Klondike

BARBARA KELCEY

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*While the Klondike Gold Rush has captured the attention of writers and historians for over ninety years, the lives of the women who lived in Dawson during the Gold Rush have, for the most part, remained anonymous. Documentary evidence, however, suggests that between three and six per cent of stampedeers who went to the Klondike were women. Because they were women, their experiences were different from those of their male counterparts. Differences were reflected in their preparations for the journey, in the way they travelled and in their accommodations en route. Their challenges often included the burdens of motherhood or the complications of marriage.*

*For women, as well as for men, the Klondike undertaking required strength and courage to withstand the hardships and privations, and the trials and disappointments. These women coped within the constraints of Victorian society which deemed their place to be in the home, serving the needs of their husbands and families. Unlike those pioneers who moved westward across the continent, Klondike stampedeers did not intend to settle permanently in the North, which meant there were different pressures placed upon those who tried to establish some kind of home. This was a transient society; the objective was to get rich as quickly as possible, then leave the region.*

*Yet female stampedeers were still nineteenth-century women who carried the added burden of expected gender roles in their Klondike outfits. Women who went to the Klondike took those roles seriously, even into the far reaches of the Yukon. For example, when she returned to Vancouver in the winter of 1899, Mrs. W. Sampson told a reporter*

*On the whole, the hardships [were] not so great. [Hers] was a most pleasant residence in the north. There [was] no reason why any lady should not be happy there, for as anywhere else, the secret [lay] in the feminine thought, "I cannot bear to be away from him". On this a happy home depend[ed] and with it no one need[ed] to hesitate to follow a husband into Dawson, or even up on the creeks.<sup>1</sup>*

*Mrs. Sampson was not alone in expressing the prevailing opinions that a woman's place was in the home, even when the house was a shack beside a mining shaft a thousand miles north of anywhere. Annie Strong echoed that same sentiment upon her arrival in Alaska when she wrote*

*women [had] made up their minds to go to the Klondike, so there [was] no use in trying to discourage them. When [their] fathers, husbands and brothers decided to go, so did [they], and [their] wills [were] strong and courage unfailing. We [went] to encourage, to assist and help provide for their bodily comforts.<sup>2</sup>*

*Motherhood in the Klondike has not been completely overlooked. Martha Black, for example, described a lonely confinement during the depths of a Yukon winter. But when women went to the Klondike to look after their men, it often meant that they had left children behind in the south. Such separation was agony for those mothers whose loyalties had*



Solomon and Rebecca Schuldenfrei, 1898

been divided by gold fever. Georgia White, often left on her own in a small cabin for days on end, recorded in her diary: "I think constantly of my little ones and God knows at times it seems more than I can bear; but I must — for Oh deliver me from becoming insane up here."<sup>3</sup>

Personal diaries containing such emotional declarations by women are unfortunately rare, and for the historian trying to better understand the lives of these women, the lack of archival evidence frustrates efforts to recreate how they coped with the isolation and the separation from their children. Yet there is one set of letters which have survived to show how one woman felt about her trip to the Klondike and her life in Dawson while her children remained in the United States. These are the letters of Rebecca (Becci) Schuldenfrei, written to her children and sister-in-law Gussie in Coudersport, Pennsylvania, during 1897 and 1898.

Mrs. Schuldenfrei was born near Cracow, Poland and both she and her husband came to the United States as teenagers. The Schuldenfreis had three children. At the time of the gold rush, Herbert was 15, Ludwig was 13, and Nellie was 11. Becci had decided to risk the hardships of the journey to the goldfields because another man who had planned to take the trip was unable to organize his affairs. The Schuldenfreis secured their grubstake by selling their business in New York. They added their savings and whatever they could borrow from friends and relatives, yet a lack of cash haunted them throughout their stay in Dawson. Although Sol was an experienced merchant, the family considered that Becci was shrewder; and the tougher; of the couple, which may account for the tension which is evident in letters written as the Dawson winter advanced.

The Schuldenfreis crossed the Chilkoot and arrived in Dawson City in early October of 1897. Although short of cash, they were able to sell a fur robe, which Sol had purchased in Seattle as part of Becci's outfit, and so rent a small cabin. Half the space was used to open a restaurant, which as a business made sense in the Dawson of 1897. Yet Sol continued to spend time and money in pursuit of the elusive gold strike and Becci's scepticism about the reality of finding gold is barely veiled in her letters.

The Schuldenfrei family believe that Becci was the second or third white woman to arrive in Dawson City, and there is

*no reason to doubt this assumption. Becci spent one lonely winter in Dawson, and left in the summer of 1898; the letters she wrote home indicate that she was never really very happy in the Klondike, even though she constantly denied that she suffered any hardships. The letters begin with the trip westward and convey a sense of adventure coupled with apprehension. The Schuldenfreis were, by their own admission, "greenhorns" and lacked any real knowledge about the Yukon or gold mining. They were, nevertheless, caught up in the excitement and carnival atmosphere of the times, spurred on by newspaper and journal accounts of fabulous wealth. From the dark, cold isolation of the Yukon winter; however, Rebecca Schuldenfrei's correspondence provides a look at another side of Klondike existence, one that has been overlooked for too long.*

*The letters have been edited for repetition.<sup>4</sup> Life was really quite boring during that first gold rush winter and there is ever a sense that Becci was not sure what to write about — or whether she, in fact, had any exciting news. She obviously had a complete sense of her wifely duties for why else would she have accompanied her husband to the ends of the earth? But Rebecca Schuldenfrei was also overwhelmed by the distance between herself and her children, a distance which grew rapidly as she began her journey across the United States.*

Chicago, Illinois,  
August 31, 1897

Dear Gussie and Schamshu

It is very late at night but yet I want to answer your letter, which I received this afternoon. Though I should very much like to encourage you about our remaining here, I would not deceive you with false hopes. We are leaving in the 2 a.m. train for Seattle, and if Elkin should feel inclined to invest some money you could send it to Seattle — address Graham; also sent the children's pictures if possible, but whatever you send, excepting a letter, let us know by a dispatch what you did send and we will know. I let you know that Burt dispatched to us

that he sent money and Sig gave us \$200; this I know will relieve your anxiety.

My heart is too full yet to thank you for all the kindness, as I am too excited yet to collect my thoughts but as you know pretty well what feelings I am capable of, I need not say any more just now. I only hope and trust in All Merciful God that we shall yet be able to show all who love and feel for us that we are not unworthy of it all. Kiss the sweet Kids for me and tell them all, especially Lulu, that I feel sure that we are destined to see them all happily married and that we will surely come back to them safe and sound. With a loving and almost overflowing heart, I remain,

En Route,  
September 2, 1897

My sweet darling kidlets

At present we are at Minot. I don't know how to describe this part of the country, as since we left Minneapolis it has been nothing more than a prairie, prairie with seldom a few cottages between which they call a station, but it is rarely nothing but a large waste of land. So far there has been nothing much worthy of description, so I will only speak about ourselves.

My own loving and dearly beloved darlings, I shall have to write to all three together, as when I think of any one of you my whole heart seems to tremble for the love of you and I imagine I will not be able to have that amount of devotion left for the other one, as it takes my bodily strength too much to try and separate you one minute from my constant thoughts of you. If I could press you all occasionally to my beating heart I should be content again for a little while, but as this cannot be I console myself with the thought that the farther away the train goes, so much nearer the time comes, when I hope to see you all safe and sound again.

I do wish that Tante Gussie sent your pictures to Seattle as it will be a great joy to look at your sweet and loving faces in my loneliness. If it were not for that feeling about you, my darlings, I would be so happy and free of care as I have not seen in many a month. I sleep and eat well and actually look so much better and stronger, that this morning I looked at myself and though I

must have been very foolish of late to think that I was getting old and homely, when after all, it was not such an ugly looking crone looking at me out of the looking-glass. (As I think that uncle will read this, I just want to jolly him along so that he should say, "my, but what a vain one she is"). And yet, if it were not for that same mean old Uncle Schamshu, I should not even have the consolation of knowing that my darlings are in good, kind, and tender hands, and that with the All Merciful God's will no harm will come to them, while you are in his care. It is this knowledge that buoys me up and gives me strength. I must finish quickly as I want to post this.

En Route,  
September 3, 1897

Dear Gussie

We just passed "Columbia Falls." Yesterday we saw nothing but prairies, but today the scenery has changed; it is not so monotonous any more. Early this morning, before it was yet good day light, I saw something that looked like immense black clouds against the sky, but as it seemed immovable and too massive, I realized that we are in the Rocky Mountains. The change from almost barren land to beautiful woods and mountains and a very long and beautiful but narrow river, called Flathead because you can see the stones and rocks which are of different colors and give the water the most exquisite colorings, is something so exhilarating as only nature can impart to the soul. We passed great, big masses of rock on which are white patches of snow which never melts on some of the peaks. Then all along that beautiful river the soil is very rich and we saw nice wheat growing. What's more, everything here looks more civilized. There are some nice little towns with people, who look like yourself, for you must know that yesterday we passed only what looked like wilderness all day long, and about the only people when we did see were real live squaws and Indians and cowboys, and even of those we saw but very few. Therefore you may imagine how the change of scene acts on one's mind. I will have to hurry if I want to post this, so I'll waft to you a thousand kisses through the wind, of which I want you to give at least half to my sweet darlings.

Seattle,  
September 6, 1897

Dear Gussie, Schamshu, and kidlets

We arrived here yesterday about half past ten in the morning. I was very tired from my long journey and therefore could not sit down to write, and besides the steamer leaves tomorrow (Monday) so you'll see we did not have any too much time to get our outfits all in the one half day Saturday. We are not yet decided whether to go by way of Skaguay or Dyea, I think it is possible that we will go by the latter way as it is a safer way of reaching Dawson City.

We have had the pleasantest time here you could imagine; we were recommended to buy our provisions at a certain place, (Cooper & Levy), and we found the people, in the first place, co-religionists, and then as nice socially as we have ever met yet with strangers. We are invited to their house this afternoon and this evening again to another family through their recommendation but don't for a moment think that it is through their having some benefit that they are so nice just the reverse, when they looked at us they tried to dissuade us from going and in fact they told us rather to go by way of Dyea as it is safer. (I had great fun in the evening after getting back to the store; we met and were introduced to Mrs. Cooper who came to see the "Lady who goes to Klondike in a silk skirt.")

By the Almighty's Will, we shall return to you safely (maybe broken in pocket), but I hope to His Mercy, yet in better health than we left. I shall only give you a slight instance before I finish of how I guard myself against extreme hardships, if only for your sweet sakes. After we were both equipped with everything we only knew to get, we received Schamshu's dispatch that he will send us more money, we got ourselves a splendid and warm fur robe to make doubly sure that we will not freeze. We thought that money might do us good as an investment, yet after we read your anxious letters we determined to make you easy on that score, and I tell you we could not freeze or starve the way we are provided even if we tried to.

I hope that this will relieve your anxiety and promising to write at every opportunity and as soon as I feel a little better, I will finish sending you my indescribable love.



*As the journey north began, Becci's letters betray a naivete about the trail that lay ahead, although this did not make her unique among stampeders. The route she describes, in the following letter, simply did not exist. This was the Stikine trail that was described the following year by Georgia Powell as unfit for any animals including humans. Powell was superintendent of the Victorian Order of Nurses who travelled north with the Yukon Field Force in 1898, and her recounting indicated that this was no easy route to the Klondike.<sup>5</sup> This leads to the question of whether or not the Schuldenfreis would have embarked had they known the true conditions of the trail. Did the vision of gold nuggets lying about waiting to be picked up blur reality? Or can an apprehension be detected that indicates a mother's concern that her children would worry, so it was necessary to present a brave and optimistic view?*

Port Townsend, Washington,  
September 8, 1897

Dear kidlets, sister and brother

I accordance with my promise of last night, I will write today again, though I have nothing new to say except to describe to you the road we are taking, which is one that has not been known so well and therefore not heard of as much as the other roads. I don't think you can find it on the map, as it is only on the new maps that you could see it. I bought one and will probably send it to you after I have posted myself a little about it.

You will know that by this time we will have given up the idea of going by Skaguay, as that way is entirely blockaded and will probably not be tractable until next spring. We have made up our minds to go by way of Dyea, which is more expensive and harder on account of the Chilkoot Pass, but yet those who have enough money to pay the Indians for packing across can at least get over. It would have cost us at least \$600.00 or \$700.00 to pack over as we have about one year's provisions and clothing, but just as we were getting ready for the Dyea way, we heard of this Fort Wrangel. This is in ordinary times the longest route by 150 miles, but one has the consolation that it is all straight road, no mountians or rocks to climb, and because it



has not been known very much yet, there are not so many people on the trail to block it up. The packers are not so independent, and what's more they have pack horses there, and we do not need to take any along. We have tried to get as much information as possible and they all tell us that this is not a dangerous route. The only hardships on this route are the 100 miles on horseback, but we can walk or ride or change as we like.

Now I will tell you how we expect to get there. From here we go to Fort Wrangel, which will take about three days. There we connect with a river-boat on the Stickeen River up to Telegraph Creek, then we have a portage of 150 miles (which means land route on foot or horse) until we come to Teslin Lake. There we will either buy a boat if there is one to be had. If not, we have to build it ourselves (for which we have all the appliances along). From this lake we go on the Lewis river and many other little lakes and rivers, but no dangerous rapids must we pass, and from there we come on the Yukon into the Klondike. There you know we will have nothing else to do but pick nuggets and shovel gold, and will not eat any snowballs either, as we have lots of nice things to eat. Now I just ask you, my dear hearts, isn't this a real fine pleasure trip. If by chance we could get frozen in on the way, which might be very likely for all I know, why then we can come back to Fort Wrangel, which is a nice little place, and stop over until spring.

The *Steamer Queen* upon which we are now, is a beauty, and we are very comfortable and in fact the whole trip so far has been very pleasant indeed, and therefore I hope for the best and will trust in God that He will protect His own and see us safely through so I don't want you to worry. Be of good cheer and the time will pass very quickly when we will see you all again.

We had our pictures taken (in Seattle). I think that by the picture you will be able to judge how we both feel. Good Night and God bless you all and keep you free from all care and anxiety.

Juneau, Alaska,  
September 12, 1897

#### My darling little kidlets

It was just two weeks ago tonight that we spent the last evening together, when you, Sweet Gussie made us all cry with your sweet little song. We have been singing this evening here in the boat, and I am thinking of you my darlings more than ever, and I had to go to the parlor as I did not want to give way to my feelings of homesickness. We have again changed our plans, and we are not going by way of the Stickeen River as this route, though less hazardous and in fact quite easy of access earlier in the season, is at this time too long and the connection between the steamers is stopped for the season. Therefore we are going by way of Dyea.

Today we saw the most beautiful scenery that you can imagine. We saw a rainbow and glaciers. This is a large strip of ice on a mountain all the way down. Then we saw what were called Sun Dogs. It was a patch of colors at the foot of the mountain just like a round ball of rainbow as big as the sun is when it goes down. It was the grandest sight, the sunlight from the distance playing on it at the foot of the mountain, and big clouds arising from within the mountains, and above these, snow lying here and there. You certainly have to look at anything like that to realize the sight.

Skaguay, Alaska,  
September 14, 1897

#### Dearest Darlings

We arrived at this place yesterday. There is no wharf here and everything is loaded upon a scow or lighter and towed above high water mark of the rocks. The people go on boats to the shore. Sol says it is a lovely place with a lot of hotels, and that one is named Waldorf, so you can see we are not in a wilderness. We have met some very nice people out here and so far the indications are that we will get over safely.

Dear Gussie, words surely cannot express our feeling right now when we hear that everybody, who had enough money to pay for packing, can and will get over Dyea Pass, and we know

now that it would have been an utter impossibility to get over with what money we had, as we have about 1500 lb. or more and it costs 40 cents per pound to pack. A boat (after we are over the pass, on Lake Linderman) will very likely cost a couple of hundred so you might just imagine how we feel toward you for sending us the \$200 after all you have done for us. All I'll say at present is that I feel that God is merciful to us and will protect us in such a way, that we shall be able to be independent, and thereby you shall have your reward, as I certainly do not wish to repay you in any other way but with my unchangeable love for you.

The scenery here is most beautiful, and we will probably remain here over night yet, as it takes a long time to unload such a lot of freight as they have on board, then we go over to Dyea on the boat, and then we shall begin our ascent of the mountain. Everybody says that if we have packers enough to pay, we can get over in about two or three days, and after that everything is easy sailing. Why, even now Sol is just saying to me "I think it will be a pleasure trip right through after all." We shall keep you posted right along, though we expect to be in Dawson City by the time you receive this. Write to us there at the Post Office, and put on a four cent stamp. It costs that to Alaska.

Dear Gus: it would do you good to see what class of people we are going with. Among these, there are quite a few who have been there and going back again. You cannot imagine how honest, kind-hearted and in fact noble they are. I think the so called "Society People" could learn yet a thing or two from them, so you can see I am not going among savages, but just the reverse. A good woman in this country is held more sacred than in our civilized New York.

You may give, if you wish, an innumerable amount of kisses and hugs to my three beauties for their Mother and Father.

*When the Schuldenfreis reached the Pass, they hired eighteen Native packers to carry their goods, apparently so they could make the climb in one trip. There was some suggestion that Sol considered this outlay an investment and that profits made in Dawson would soon take care of the expense.*

Dyea,  
September 16, 1897

Dear folks

Thank God, so far, so good. We have all our things packed, and ready for a walk up the mountain with the Indians tomorrow morning at six o'clock. Up till now everything went very smooth, except the last night after we left the steamer. We had the beginning of Klondike hardships, though we know, if it should not be much worse, why then it will be right enough. We camped on a scow over night and it happened to rain as it usually does here at night, but we were partially protected by half a tent overhead and we were fenced around with a whole lot of hay, and we slept on a bunk or rather sat on it. When we got tired or stiff one kind-hearted man told us to turn the bunk over and we will feel softer. But we actually enjoyed it for a change, and you would not believe how good camping out seems to do us. Sol looks so fine as he has not looked in two years, and he told me that I look like a pretty (that is good looking rather) young boy, so I guess it does not do me any harm either. The longer we are out on the road, and the more people we meet, the better we seem to like them. They are all without any distinction, a kindly lot and well contented.

There is no style about them here to be sure and it is all "Rough and Ready" as the saying goes, but you can read them all like a book, openhearted and honest. We have no anxiety about getting over the mountains, but we are somewhat anxious about getting over on the lakes as we will run short of money for a boat, as we will have about \$100 left after we pay the Indians, which will be over \$700 as they charge like the furies and a person is utterly powerless without them. White people cannot pack and climb like they do. They take 150 lbs. on their backs easier than Sol can carry a basket of fruit.

*On September 19th, Becci dispatched a short note to Coudersport because of reports of "disaster" on the Pass in which a woman was involved. An avalanche had caused flooding and, although some people had been drowned, the major loss was in provisions and many were forced to turn back. Becci told the family that she and Sol were safe and that the family was not to worry. On September 20th, however, the Schuldenfreis were still on the trail between Dyea and*

*Lake Lindeman<sup>6</sup>, because the Native packers had left them alone, camped in heavy rain, and contemplating their future. Sol wrote that while they were only one and a half days from Lake Lindeman, they were just as far from it as before. He was afraid that the Indians would give up the job, and if they did not return, Becci and Sol would also have to give up and go back to Dyea. In the same letter Sol related that he and Becci were travelling with a group of North West Mounted Police who helped them a great deal. By this stage of the trip, it is likely that moral support was as important as any physical presence.*

Lake Linderman,  
September 25, 1897

Dearest darlings all

I really do not know whether I should give you the satisfaction, dearest sister, to describe in detail our trip over the Chilkoot Pass. It certainly was never made for human beings, as anyone who once went over it is either more or maybe less than human. No living being who has not gone over it can actually imagine or anticipate what it really is no matter how fearfully hard one pictures it, it certainly surpasses all human realization. I cannot find words hard enough to express it, as the most infernal would be the mildest kind of expression to give it. Surely it does my heart good if I can even vent my feelings a little on paper, as I could not leave our troubles on my chest. It was so heavy yesterday that I could not breathe any more, and when we did see the end of our journey, and the sun was smiling a beautiful welcome to us, we were about one-quarter of an hour's walk from the lake where I knew I would be helped and taken care of. Men here are the kindest hearted I ever saw. I actually gave up and should have turned back (if such a thing were possible for me) as I had no power to move or drag my weary limbs any longer. That last quarter of an hour took us two and a half hours until we reached a tent. One kind hearted big fellow, who saw us on the way, and whom we had travelled with on the *Queen*, said to Sol for God's sake, take her to my tent and give her a good glass of whiskey as she is played out. Imagine Sol himself, stopping to rest at almost every step, his

ankles strained to their utmost from two days steady tramping on high boulders and knee-deep mud, trying to bear it all so as not to make it harder for me, although nothing mattered to me any more.

*The heaviness Becci felt during this part of the trip may well have been a result of the altitude as well as the nature of the clothing she wore. Some women stampederers wore "short" walking skirts on the trail, and a few wore trousers of some sort, yet the evidence suggests that most women travelled in a modified costume that still resembled the fashion of the day, which included corsets and several petticoats. Except for the brief mention of clothing while in Seattle, Becci never described any special Klondike costumes, but it is likely that she climbed the Pass and travelled the trail dressed in such a way.*

*Comments about the gentlemanly concern and conduct of male stampederers is echoed by other women who travelled the Passes the following year; although it should be noted Victorian women were unlikely to comment upon the reverse. Flora Shaw, for example, travelled alone to Dawson. Shaw was the colonial editor of the London Times, and she reported that she never felt unsafe in the company of men on the trail. Her impression was that male stampederers were cheerful and they often paused to pass a few pleasantries. Presumably, however, readers of the Times would not be interested in sexual propositions made to an unchaperoned woman and it is doubtful that Shaw would relate any.<sup>7</sup>*

*The Schuldenfreis left Lake Lindeman with one dollar, for they had paid \$20 duty on their outfits at the border and \$100 for a share in a boat that would take them to Dawson. They expected the trip to take twelve days. After two days in the boat Becci wrote to her children that the weather was fine and that they, of all the people who had left for the Klondike at the same time as they had, were the first on the lake. They were flat broke, she told them, but the children were not to worry. There were, in addition, typical motherly admonishments:*

I hope, my dear darlings, that you are not giving aunt and uncle too much trouble, and that you are all obedient. I should very much like you all to take some cod liver oil this winter

without fail three times a day, as you all need it. You Bert, see to it that Lulu takes it too as you know he is neglectful.

Fort Selkirk, Alaska  
October 11, 1897

Dearest and most beloved folks

As you will perceive, we are as yet about four days from Dawson, but we are in no danger to be frozen on the rivers anymore. The weather now is beautiful and not very cold, just like our November. On the fifth of October, we went by the most dangerous point of the journey, but Sol and I walked it, while the people we are with were on the boat. It is called the White Horse rapids and as I saw our boat shoot through, I assure you that I lifted my eyes to heaven, remembering at the same time that it was Atonement Day, and prayed to God to see us safely through. He heard my prayer.

On the second and third we had terrible cold, and Sol looked like an icicle on the boat steering. I had a very troubled dream a couple of nights before the fifth about home, which made me cry for homesickness. We have had no extraordinary hardships, and in fact if it were not for the eating, which we are not used to yet, we would enjoy this just like a yachting trip. We are on the waters all day from six o'clock until six, and then we camp, but I sit nice and comfortable behind a warm stove on the boat.

*There are two footnotes to this letter. The first concerns the bardship of the Klondike trip which has been described by every stamper who braved the trail, regardless of the route. A Klondike Nugget editorial of November of 1898 noted the "courage and persistent energy they [women] displayed in surmounting the difficulties incident to the journey to the Klondike command our respectful admiration."<sup>8</sup> Yet despite this comment, upon reflection, it could be concluded that travelling to the Klondike was no more exceptional a feat for women than was sailing to the New World in the seventeenth century. Neither was the journey more difficult than that of women who put their faith in York boats and Red River carts in their move to Lord Selkirk's settlement. As stamper Dr. Lydia Clements explained later, a "trip to the Klondike may*



*have seemed appalling, but it didn't compare with a journey to Chicago from Boston" eighty years earlier?*

*Despite such observations, some dangers were very real, and there was official reaction to the one described by Becci at the White Horse Rapids. After several drownings in the rapids, Colonel Sam Steele of the North West Mounted Police issued a directive that no women or children were to travel in boats through the rapids.<sup>10</sup>*

*The Schuldenfreis arrived in Dawson on October 15th, four weeks after they had left Dyea. With Becci's first letter from Dawson, which she still believed was in Alaska, her disillusionment with life in the Klondike becomes evident. Becci was always concerned about catching the mail. The frustration with the lack of communication with her children was beginning to rankle, as was the stark reality of conditions in Dawson. There was, however, optimism expressed in these letters but the question remains as to how much of this was written merely so her children and family would not be unduly concerned?*

*What emerges from this following early letter from Dawson is the first sense of quiet desperation of a lonely woman, perhaps best exemplified when Becci laments that she is unable to afford the cost of a small mirror. As a consequence, she was probably unable to maintain her appearance, which made it difficult for her to preserve her own sense of femininity as well as rise to the expectations of the men around her. It should be remembered that the stampedeers who left memoirs of this period universally share the opinion that the women who were in the Klondike at this time were either prostitutes or women of loose and lascivious morals. This was a rough mining frontier and Mrs. Schuldenfrei may well have had to work hard to preserve her identity as a respectable woman.*

Dawson City, Alaska,  
October 17, 1897

My dearest and sweetest ones at home

Here we are at our destination at last. Of course it is hard for us to tell yet how things are out here, but so far we are looking

for a room or cabin as we should not like the prospect of living in a tent all winter.

October 19th. Though we landed with just one dollar in our pockets, we rented a cabin and are going to open a restaurant for a few months until Sol can go out prospecting or looking for a claim. As I don't think I shall be able to mail this letter before the first of November. I will write all along before I finish it. Just at present things do not look so bright as they are pictured in the newspapers. I suppose I shall write to Mrs. Toledano<sup>11</sup> myself about her venturing to come out here, but at any rate, dear Gussie, I should like that you let her know that she should rather try and struggle along as best she can, and if she only makes her daily bread, she shall be satisfied and thank heaven that she did not come out here. This beautiful Klondike is only good for very strong and hardworking miners, as any one who is not brought up from childhood to the hardest kinds of labor is of no earthly use here, or all along the trip. For instance, if you are thirsty, you have to fetch the water yourself from up the hill upon the ice. If you want to sit down you must know how to pitch your tent and sit on one of your sacks. If you feel cold, which is very natural for a person in this country, you must have wood. Now this is more easily said than had. Even if you had money to buy it, and it only costs about three dollars a log, you must chop it yourself. They sell it in logs and you have to carry it to your tent and chop it up. Now whoever wants to come here should first go into a forest and see if he can chop down a few trees, cut them into small pieces about two feet long, and see how many he is able to do in a day, as one must have fire all day and put wood into the stove every ten minutes to keep it burning. Now why I am saying so much about this wood is because it is no small matter. So far we have had no extra, or in fact any kind of hardships, which I consider such, except the wood chopping. You might just imagine what this is if Sol actually cried with tears when he did it, and it cost \$15 a day to hire a man to do it for you.

Now, as to prospecting. You must know how to wield a shovel and a pick, and you must know how to carry your own provisions on your back as you go along, which means about one hundred pounds at a time, or to pull a sled with a few hundred pounds on as you never know how long it might take until one comes back to town. Just now Sol went for wood, poor fellow. I almost dislike myself for using it up. I should like to have one

piece a day if it could be so. We were talking today how surprised you might be and what "scelemel" you would call us if we might have to ask for money to come home next summer, and yet such might be the case, though I hope to God that things will look brighter after a while. We could have made a fortune if we had brought in a few thousand pounds of flour and candles, as the flour sells, that is if you can get it at all, at almost \$2.00 per pound, and one candle for \$1.00.<sup>12</sup> We have four hundred pounds of flour left and this is our only hope now of making some little money so that we can live in a cabin this winter instead of a tent. Mrs. Toledano might think living in a tent might not be so bad, but she might think it an Ocean Grove tent. Indeed, these that the people here take along to live in on the way and out here are just plain canvas with nothing for the bare ground, provided it is bare, for the floor, or else a few rocks and some snow for a bed and mattress. Of course, everybody has his sleeping bag, but yet you lay these on the ground and the tent overhead. One consolation is that these bags are very warm as they are invariably made of fur or sheep-skin.

Since we left Dyea, we had not yet sat or slept any differently than on the ground. As you must know, one must live that way as there are no hotels on the way or here, and wherever you pitch your gang tent, there you live. Out there at present you can hardly get a room to live in, as there are not enough cabins in town. They rent for \$75 to \$100 a month. We rented one for \$150 a month but it is a very large one, and we will make a restaurant out of it.

October 20th. Probably from the foregoing pages you might think that we are very unhappy, but far from it. We would not want to exchange with our last months at home for any hardships we might really have to encounter, for as yet, excepting the wood getting, we are as happy and as content as we have been in many years, although we were somewhat discouraged. I say were — but hurrah for the Klondike. Today we made our first deal. We have plenty of everything but no money, so we concluded to sell our fur robe. We put a little sign on paper and before a half a day was over we sold it for \$300; it cost us \$70. It was a lynx fur, very soft, and not heavy, wherein lies the beauty of it. We actually bought it for an experiment, and we see it brought good results. We have the first gold dust as you

do not, but rarely, get money here. We have enough money now to buy some wood and cooking utensils.

Everybody tells us that in a restaurant we might have a little mine of our own, as a meal costs the slight sum of \$3.00, and it is no extra fine one at that. If you ask for a few beans, that goes extra. An apple pie, which sells for about ten or fifteen cents at home costs \$1.50. I wanted to buy a small looking-glass just big enough to see my face only, and they wanted \$5.00 for it, so of course I did not buy it. The reason that some things are so dear just now is because the steamers that left by way of St. Michael in the summer did not come in as the water was too low, and they can not even come in as they are frozen up now. Consequently, they (Dawson) are short of provisions, mainly flour and candles. Plenty of beef has come in and more is coming, but the miners do not care for beef as much as bread.

*Women who could provide domestic services and, particularly, those who could bake real bread and supply pies and donuts were able to make a good living in Dawson during the Gold Rush. Frances Dorley from Seattle, for example, claimed to have baked tons of bread and pies and millions of donuts at her first road-house situated at the junction of Eldorado and Bonanza Creeks.<sup>13</sup> Miners baked bannock or survived on hard tack, for few men had learned the art of breadmaking in their mother's kitchen as virtually all women had. Climatic conditions, availability of supplies, and the unreliable Yukon stove probably put quite a damper on amateur efforts at breadmaking, and the Klondike was no place to learn the skill. Home baked goods did not have just culinary appeal, however, for it is possible that, for lonely miners, these treats provided a link with their own wives and families. Becci Schuldenfrei's restaurant and those like it were but one example of how women were able to capitalize on skills which society considered as women's work.*

October 28th. I will begin this page rather funny. You would all laugh to see me sitting, writing at the fireside light, first because I rather enjoy the novelty of it, and second because candles are so scarce. Besides being \$1.50 a piece now, you can hardly buy them for that. We moved into our cabin a day before yesterday, and though it is not quite finished yet, we are far more comfortable than in a tent. Now I will just give you a little instance of Klondike. There is but one tin shop in town, your

meat you must buy by the quarter of beef at the rate of \$1.25 a pound. Groceries, excepting sugar or tea, you must actually beg the two stores to sell them to you and then they do not, except if you happen to arouse their sympathy because you are a woman. A stranger (man) in town cannot get any groceries for love nor money.

We bought a stove, second-handed, which I assure you would have trouble to sell in a New York junk shop. It is so old and broken on the top. I bought it for \$85.00 and it cost us ten dollars to put up and eight dollars for pipes. Sol had to bring it in himself and lend our man ours and take it there to him before he wanted to part with or sell his. If you happen to be fortunate enough to get someone to sell anything, you must carry it home yourself, nobody even gives you a wooden box to carry your goods in, you must sled them home. I suppose you will think that I am foolish to write all this, but it seems so strange that people should have to beg for anything they want to buy.

I do not know if I will have time to write to Mrs. Toledano, and if I do not, I should like to send her a letter of my prayer for her. She should under no circumstances undertake to come as mines cannot be had so easily any more, and this is not a country where man or woman who is not the hardiest kind of laborer can make any money here. Education or penmanship, or in fact any knowledge that is not mechanical is worth absolutely nothing here because if you cannot work as a woodsman or a miner, a person is lost.<sup>14</sup>

You would be surprised how nice one can write by a wood fire. Here I have scribbled off three pages and yet I am not in a hurry to finish for it seems to me that it will be a long time before you read this, or we shall hear from you. My God, when I think of it, I can only sit and cry, how I could ever have undertaken such a thing, and especially as the mines of gold are not to be located as easily as they are represented to be, and it is hardly worth while to come out here for the novelty of it. For pity's sake, if you can keep tenderfeet at home, do so.

November 18th. In about a week we will have Thanksgiving, and I suppose I shall thank God for all the good we are having, though I shall find it very hard to offer thanks for being parted from you, my dear ones as it is the greatest trial I have to endure. I try very hard to keep from thinking of home and sometimes a few days pass away and I do not look at your sweet

faces because I know my courage and endurance give way and it is hard for me to resign myself to the thought and fact of not being able to see or hear of you. Two gentlemen are going out on the ice tomorrow, they will take our letters along, and if I had the money it requires to go with them, I should, regardless of the consequences of actually risking my life only so that I could hope to see you again soon. I am afraid that my strength or stock of forbearance is not equal to the task to only be able to think of my darlings and not once to feel their dear sweet lips on mine. I think I will not write very much more, as the tears blind me as I am sitting now and thinking that I must have been crazy to undertake it at all. But my darlings, do not imagine that we are having any hardships at all excepting that we are parted from you, otherwise we have it far better than most greenhorns (cheechawkers as they are called here) have it in this country. We at least have a log cabin and we have better prospects to make a little money than others. What's more, money or no money, if I have to beg my way home next summer I shall do it to see you and I know that you will be glad to have me home even if we do not make any money.

We had some cold days already — 32 degrees below zero, but I do not go out much so I don't feel it and Papa does not seem to mind it as much as I thought he would. I was just reading, or rather trying to read, what I wrote, to Papa, and all I can do is finish this as quickly as possible. I shall pray to the Almighty every day to lend me strength to feel resigned to my fate until we shall be able to come to you, and He in His mercy keep you safe and well and from all evil.

December 11, 1897

Dearest darlings

Our landlord is going out on the ice tomorrow morning and he will take this letter, which I hope will reach you very soon. I presume that you have received all our letters we sent to you, or at any rate, that you have heard from us. We are safe and sound although sadly disappointed in our hopes and expectations, yet we do not feel so despondent any more as at first. Papa is away these last two days (up the creek as they say here), looking at some claim that he intends to buy a half interest in.

As you know now, we are running two restaurants, one of which pays very nicely although this week has been quite dull, but the first two weeks we made a nice few hundred dollars, and we are buying provisions all along at one dollar a pound for everything that is food and yet it pays. I should be glad to let you know the result of Papa's trip but I don't think that he will be back in time before this letter goes away.

We have had very severe weather here — already as much as 58 below zero and although I was not out of doors I almost froze in bed in our fur sleeping bag. Papa was out on the street in the coldest days and he doesn't seem to mind it near as much as we all thought he would. I was out already when it was 48 below, but you may be sure I was wrapped up so that barely one eye was out of the shawl. I wonder how long a time it will be before we can hear from you, our sweet treasures. It is a very fearful thing to be in a place where one can not hear from the outside world for such a long time especially when we have left all that is precious to us. But I will not begin again to give rise to my despondent thoughts as it makes me weak in body and soul, and I know that I shall have to endure it yet many a long month before I shall begin to hope to see you. Oh! if I could only know that you are all well, how happy and content I should indeed be, even out here in this uncivilized country.

*Becci Schuldenfrei was exhibiting all the signs of Yukon cabin fever by the time this letter was dispatched. Loneliness and homesickness could no longer be overcome by thoughts of romantic adventure and instant wealth. As she indicated in the same letter to her sister and brother-in-law, the Schuldenfreis were still optimistic about finding a good mining claim, which was, of course, the principal goal of almost everyone in Dawson. She told Gus and Schamsbu that Sol had purchased a lay, which she explained meant fifty per cent of all the gold that might be dug out by three men until the first of May. Her comments about Sol's investments, however, reflect some personal conflict between loyalty to her husband and a growing lack of confidence in the actual prospects for success.*

Of course, it is just a chance. If we will be fortunate we might get for our share maybe \$25,000, and on the other hand it may not be worth enough to pay for the three men at the rate of \$15.00 a day, but it is in the very best location and on the



best creek, Eldorado. Yet it is all a matter of luck, the claim next to us might be worth ever so much and yet the next to this may not pay at all. We shall certainly hope for the best, at any rate Sol could have made \$600 at once if he wanted to take a partner on his lay. I really do not care to write more about this for fear maybe that when he comes back it may not look so bright, and I have to send this letter before he returns. Please remember to give the boys cod liver oil.

January 10th, 1898

Most beloved darlings, sister and brother

◦ We have another opportunity to let you hear of us through a gentleman who is going out on the ice, as you must know that the official mail has not come in nor gone out, and whatever you receive from us is from some acquaintances who will take them out. Our restaurant business is very dull now, and we are not doing anything in the way of making any money. We moved into our own cabin, which we bought. It is a log cabin 16 by 18. We fixed it up by making a little dining room, private hall, and kitchen and bedroom of it. The partitions consist of walls which I stitched on a machine I had loaned to me. I have your pictures on the walls, and I'll just let you know how one can live in the Yukon quite cosy in such a cabin and at the same time have some things in it too. Such as for instance we have about 1500 pounds of provisions in our private hall behind a drapery. We have over 500 pounds more in our bedroom and kitchen. There are two large tables and several benches, a bed, or excuse me a bunk, a large stove, innumerable pots, dishes, and 200 pounds of beef, but this I have in a box outside the cabin, a sewing machine, and all our clothes and even two hammocks. I guess I have it all now, and yet we are quite comfortable, certainly without any fear of starving. We get up in the morning well about half past ten or later as the day begins here very late, and it gets to be night about 4 p. m., but the days will grow longer from now on. The evenings are the most beautiful nights as you never see in the United States or rather not so far north. Altogether the weather is grand and far superior to the east as one doesn't feel the cold as there are no winds. The snow is frozen on the ground all winter and that makes the

nights so bright. The moon is to be seen until almost midday, but the sun is barely beginning to show now. I have not seen it yet in Dawson. Papa said the other day that if he could have all his beloved ones here he would not wish for an easier life, and I don't blame him. The only difference between us is that Papa has great hopes of making some money next spring, and I think that I'll be glad to get home with the experience of the trip to Dawson. It is already four months since we have heard of you last, so just imagine, if you can, my feelings but I better not begin about it all. I must not forget to tell you that the lay that Sol intended to buy fell through.

*Late in January, Becci wrote a lengthy letter explaining why the mail service was not very regular. It was difficult to find men willing to carry mail across the ice, for the extra weight was not worth the few dollars that was paid. No official mail had gone out of Dawson, nor had any arrived. There was also a scarcity of writing materials, and Becci noted that she had only a quarter of a small bottle of ink left, and this had been watered several times. Writing paper, if available, sold for one dollar a sheet. Supplies were not expected until June. For Becci and Sol, business was at a standstill and the long winter nights were passed by playing cards or visiting two Jewish gentlemen whom Sol had met in Dawson. Becci still insisted that her only hardship was being separated from her family and was making plans, by this time, to return home in the summer of 1898. The Schuldenfreis still hoped for a prosperous stake but were beginning to see the futility of their journey. On February 1st, Becci added to the letter started on January 21st.*

My pen broke and I have recourse to a pencil. Now the reason I think we are not in position to make any money is that we have no show of getting any kind of goods in here, and it is really taking one's life in your hands to undertake to go out on the ice for goods. We don't expect to do any business until May or June, and by then we won't have enough grub left to run a restaurant. We had made a few hundred dollars in about two months, but we bought a lot of provisions, as you know we only brought enough for ourselves. For the balance, we bought a claim, which cost \$5000, and we will have to pay \$4000 of this by July 1.

We sent two men up to work the claim, but we have heard nothing as yet, and it might prove a success or a failure, as God wills it. If we are lucky it will be a good investment, otherwise we might have to write home for tickets to come home with. Naturally those claims which are already known to be very rich we cannot reach as they run up into the hundred thousands, so we had to take a chance to invest on a smaller scale.

I have nothing more to write. Dear Kids: I want you to write home for a Bible and you should read Hebrew every day so that you don't forget it. You dear Gus, kindly see that they don't fool you about it, as I know that Lulu, for instance would rather sing that he lost his pants in the Houchee Couchee Dance, and Bert and Nell might find some other little excuse. I wonder how poor father is? He is constantly in my mind, more often than when I was at home.

March 1st, 1898

Dearest and most beloved folks

The time seems so heavy on my hands. I was just beginning to write when a gentleman came in to tell me that at last, thank heaven, the mail arrived, but we are not able to get it for a few days, and I have to hurry up with this as the couriers are going out tomorrow.

Sol is again up on the creek to make some arrangements with some people about selling half interest in his claim as it does not seem to be a good one. Somehow I think we don't seem to have much luck, but yet I ought not to complain as not anybody of all those people who came in at the time we did are any better off, nor in fact have they got such easy times as we have. We don't give up hope of making some money when the great influx of people is coming in the spring. Just at present we are making enough for wood and water; it costs us \$65 a month for these. I am making a few neckties and if we could only sell enough or even a dozen a day we could make enough in one month to keep us well supplied with wood and water for almost a whole year, but the trouble is that there are very few people in town to buy anything.

I do not know what to write about especially as I have not seen your letters yet and it makes me so agitated that I am

almost losing control over my pen. My hand trembles so. Just imagine six long months and not a word from our dear ones. Oh! the fearful longing and anxiety to get those letters is what makes to us life in this country one of hardship.

April 12, 1898

Dearest and most beloved folks

Your letters of February 5th we received and rejoiced over them as they showed us that Klondike gold or no Klondike gold, your hearts and your love for us is, and I hope will continue to be, the same. If I could see that there is any prospect for us to stay longer I should not hesitate on account of personal suffering (I mean that being away from all of you mostly as there is not any other hardships to speak of). It is true that there are not many nor in fact any comforts, but then there is a vast difference between hardships and no comforts. But in the main, I do not see how we can make any money here. We have not been very fortunate since the last two months, and we have lost a nice few hundred dollars on provisions of which we laid in too large a stock, as everybody seemed to be scared out of their wits about starvation. In the last two months more than a dozen restaurants have sprung up in the space of about two blocks.

Sol is up on the creeks again today on that Victoria claim that I wrote about, but somehow the prospects are not good over there, in fact, it is not such an easy proposition to find the gold although the newspapers write that it is all over the Klondike, but it is not, and even when in some places you do find it, it costs almost more to work the ground than you can get out of it. Yet Sol doesn't think he shall go home this summer, but I intend to with God's will.

*From the directions that followed this revelation, it appears that Sol was planning to set up a haberdashery business in Dawson. Becci suggests that Gus send lots of negligees, all kinds of underwear, soft hats and caps, handkerchiefs, neck-ware, suspenders, and some stiff bosom shirts as well as cheviot shirts. What they really wanted, however, was about*

*ten thousand curled springs for making furniture and bed-springs.*

*Despite this enthusiasm, Becci was obviously at the end of her tether and the Klondike had lost for her all of its earlier appeal. Mail had begun to come into Dawson, and Becci explained that letters were the only enjoyment and sunshine she and her husband had for the moment.*

If it were not for your sweet, kind and loving letters, which give us a little new life, we, that is rather, I, was getting to be almost despondent, but after reading your letters I thought that do I need to pine away even though we shall not make money in the Klondike when we have such treasures at home who will certainly will not not love us any less for the want of gold, and who cannot love us any more even if we had all Klondike than they do now when we have not even a tiny good slice of it.

I am happy with the knowledge that the children give you pleasure and though I am sure that they are all very good, loving and obedient, yet I do not want you to be too indulgent. When they deserve it, which I really doubt they ever do, you must give them a good sound thrashing. It is good for their health and will be still better for me, for when I come home, and should have occasion to do it, I don't want them to think they get the whipping from mamma for their health only.

*With these maternal sentiments, Becci closed her last letter from the Klondike, though she did not leave Dawson for St. Michael until September 1st. Sol later built a "hotel" in Dawson, and worked his claims for another year with little success. His letters to Coudersport reflected some panic when he did not receive any word from Becci until March of 1899. Thirty years later, members of the Schuldenfrei family transcribed Becci's letters from the originals. Unfortunately the original correspondence has been lost. There is some doubt whether those letters that were transcribed represent the complete set of correspondence and there is no way of knowing whether all of Becci's letters arrived in Coudersport. Nevertheless, the correspondence that remains provides a memento of the past that is in many ways unique.*

*Becci Schuldenfrei did not have a reputation to solidify like those who published memoirs and accounts of their Klondike experience. Her letters portray a banal existence rather than*

one full of excitement and scandal, yet Becci Schuldenfrei's Klondike story is important because few women were in Dawson during the first winter of the Klondike Gold Rush. While her correspondence reflects the concerns of a wife and mother and not those of an entrepreneur or dance hall girl, in her own ordinary way Rebecca Schuldenfrei was a Klondike Queen. What is most important about Mrs. Schuldenfrei's letters, however, is that they serve to show that there were ordinary women in the Klondike, just as there were ordinary men. That presence suggests another dimension to an event that had an impact on the entire Western world and it suggests that no history is complete until it has been viewed through the eyes of the ordinary woman as well.

Barbara Kelcey is a doctoral candidate in the Department of History at the University of Manitoba.

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> "A Woman's Life in Dawson," *New York Times*, November 26, 1899, p. 24.
- <sup>2</sup> Annie Hall Strong, "From Woman's Standpoint," *Skaguay News*, December 31, 1897, p. 2.
- <sup>3</sup> Georgia White, diary, Yukon Archives, p. 8. Diary entry is June 27, 1898.
- <sup>4</sup> Some punctuation has been added to improve legibility. Becci Schuldenfrei wrote long and involved sentences punctuated with semicolons that often leave the reader winded. For the most part, however, the letters remain intact.
- <sup>5</sup> Georgia Powell to Annie E. Pride, Victorian Order of Nurses for Canada. Papers relating to the Victorian Order of Nurses, National Archives of Canada.
- <sup>6</sup> Editor's Note: The lake that bears the historic name Lake Linderman is now known as Lake Lindeman.
- <sup>7</sup> Flora Shaw, "Klondike," *Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute*, Volume 30, February, 1899, p. 188.
- <sup>8</sup> "Our Lady Friends," *Klondike Nugget*, November 5, 1898, p. 2.
- <sup>9</sup> Dr. Lydia Clements, "Fourth of July in the Klondike," *National Magazine*, Volume 10, July, 1899, p. 339.
- <sup>10</sup> Colonel Sam Steele, *Forty Years in Canada* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), p. 311.
- <sup>11</sup> The Toledanos were friends of the Schuldenfreis. They planned to follow into the Klondike in the spring of 1898.

- <sup>12</sup> The Eaton's catalogue, which offered a Klondike outfit in 1898, listed the price of 500 pounds of flour as \$12.00, and of 25 pounds of candles as \$2.50.
- <sup>13</sup> Patricia McKeever, "The Lady Went North," *Alaska Sportsman*, February, 1948, pp 30-31.
- <sup>14</sup> What is most important about this advice is that it was written in 1897. The impact of the 1898 influx had yet to be felt in the goldfields.