

# **River of Mists**

People of the Upper Skeena, 1821–1930

Geoff Mynett

CAITLIN PRESS  
2022

## Preface

The sketches in this book are of people who either lived in or visited Hazelton, a small town on the Skeena River in northern British Columbia, in the period from 1821 to 1930. By no means were all important. Some were merely visitors. But they all have a connection to Hazelton and have contributed in some way to the rich history of this beautifully situated town. My selection is admittedly and unapologetically whimsical.

The title of the book, *River of Mists*, comes from the Gitxsan name for the Skeena River. The Skeena was a famously difficult river to navigate—sometimes shallow, sometimes deep. The challenges included dangerous rapids, moving sandbars and swift, changeable currents. Steamers, it was said, had to be able to float on dew. Many people lost their lives in the Skeena. In 1907, for example, the river turned over and wrecked the sternwheeler *Mount Royal*, killing six of the crew. Ice closed the river every winter for four or five months. Even in summer, high or low waters could cause steamer captains not to risk the trip. The journey upriver could take from four days to three weeks, with six to seven days being typical. The journey down often took one day. It was, one passenger said, the journey of a lifetime.

Hazelton is situated at the confluence of the Skeena and Bulkley Rivers. Before 1871 this was known as the Forks of the Skeena or, locally, the Forks. Although Hazelton was always a small town, barely rising above the status of village, for the forty years commencing in 1871 it was the most important non-Indigenous settlement in the northern interior of British Columbia.

The names of the rivers are confusing. In the early days, the Bulkley was known as Simpson's River. Its Indigenous name was Watsonquah. Below the Forks and to the sea, the merged river was also known as Simpson's River. Fort Simpson was established at the mouth of the Nass River in the mistaken belief that it was the mouth of Simpson's River. The Babine River flowed from Babine Lake and joined the main river (the Skeena) below Kisgegas. From there to the Forks, it was called the Babine River and, occasionally, McDougall's River.

The Gitxsan Indigenous People have lived in the district for millennia. Their name for the confluence of the two rivers was Gwin Ts'ihl.<sup>1</sup> To avoid confusion, in this book I refer to it as the Forks. The Gitxsan village at the Forks, Gitanmaax, was the central village of the Gitxsan people. From three thousand to four thousand Gitxsan people—it is difficult to ascertain accurate numbers—lived in the district in villages such as Kispiox, Gitsegukla and Gitanyow. Across the Bulkley River in the huge area to the south lived the Wet'suwet'en Indigenous People.

The Forks of the Skeena has always been a place where Indigenous Peoples have met to trade. It provided a natural and convenient trading location for people from the coast, the Skeena, Nass, and Bulkley Valleys and beyond.

The non-Indigenous settlement at Hazelton was founded in 1871. For the next twenty years, goods were brought upriver by canoe and pack train. The first steamer managed the difficult journey upriver to Hazelton in 1891. Depending on conditions on the river, it was possible for steamers to reach the dozen miles beyond Hazelton to Kispiox. One need was to transport Gitxsan people who lived in Kispiox downriver in the spring to work in the fish canneries on the coast. Nevertheless, for all practical purposes, Hazelton was the highest point of navigation, and this made it an excellent location for trading posts and stores. Steamers brought goods from the coast to Hazelton, from where they were carried on by pack train into the hinterland. Miners on their way to prospect in the Omineca Mountains to the east bought their supplies, and often spent their winters, in Hazelton. Omineca is the Indigenous name for the whortleberry, a food staple for the inhabitants of the region.<sup>2</sup>

Gitxsan stories have been told by many others. Neil Sterritt has written about the Gitxsan people and their stories in his book *Mapping My Way Home*. I cannot add anything to what he has written, nor should I. I fear that I, with neither the knowledge nor deep understanding of Gitxsan culture, would not be able to relate them with integrity.

The Gitxsan people did not have a written language. This led non-Indigenous people to spell Gitxsan names any way they wanted, sometimes differently even in the same sentence. Spelling of Gitxsan names was, as a consequence, often wildly personal. Kispiox, for example, was variously spelled Kispiax, Kishpiax, Kishpyax, Kispiox, Kitsbyox and Kish-py-axe; today it is also called by its Gitxsan name of Anspayaxw.

The Gitxsan village at Hazelton, technically a separate place, is named Gitanmaax. Some of the settler names for Indigenous places are:

- Forks of the Skeena—Gwin Ts'ihl
- Fort (Port) Simpson—Lax Kw'alaams
- Kispiox—Anspayaxw
- Kitsegukla—Gitsegukla
- Kitwancool—Gitanyow
- Kitwanga—Gitwangak
- Moricetown—Witset
- Port Essington—Spaksuut/Spokeshute
- Rocher Déboulé—Stekyawden

On occasion I refer to the Hudson's Bay Company as merely the Company. With a strong prejudice against acronyms, I prefer to use the term "HBC" only in quotations.

During the years covered by this book, many non-Indigenous people used language about Indigenous people that today is considered deeply offensive and unacceptable. I have used the original language in this book only in the quoted passages from the time; not to set it down as written would be dishonest to the often uncomfortable facts of history. The damage done by colonial governance rightly requires the hard work of reconciliation and the changing of attitudes and practices of systemic racism. On the other hand, we should be cognizant that all historical fact is filtered in some way. Selection of facts, translation, transcription, the reliability of second- or third-hand information, wishful thinking, failing memories and deliberate distortion all shape our pictures of the past. As L.P. Hartley wrote in the prologue to *The Go-Between*, "the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there."<sup>3</sup>



Map by Morgan Hite, Hesperus Arts, Smithers

## Jack Gillis and His Helpful Grave

1872

**F**or those who like to read about tragic love, Sperry Cline tells a story about a prospector named Jack Gillis.<sup>1</sup> When Jack learned that his girl wouldn't wait for him any longer and had married another, Cline wrote, he committed suicide on a lonely trail in the Omineca Mountains.

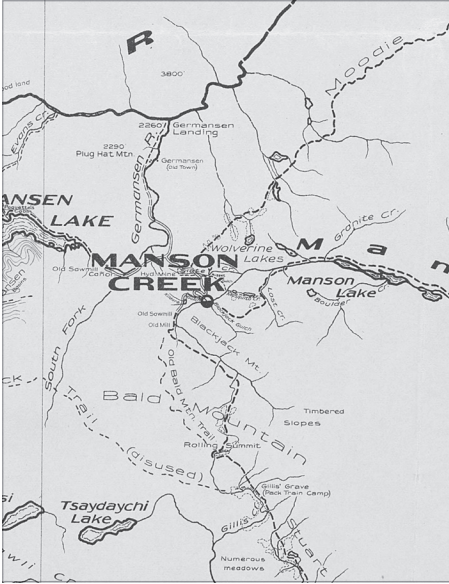
Cline arrived in Hazelton in 1904, after service during the Matabele and Boer Wars in South Africa. He was a packer, a carrier of mail to and from the coast, a prospector and, commencing in 1914, twenty-six years a provincial policeman. He became one of the more colourful characters of Hazelton and later wrote about his years in the North.

He wrote that not long after he arrived in Hazelton, one lonely grave out in the wilderness had aroused his curiosity. The graves of most men who died on the trail quickly disappeared into the earth. The grave of Jack Gillis, who had died over thirty years before, was well maintained, however. Someone was repainting the fence posts and refreshing the inscription. Someone was also replacing rotten logs of the enclosing fence. In the bars of Hazelton, Cline pressed old-time prospectors to tell him. Did they remember Gillis from the days of the Omineca Gold Rush? Who was he, anyway? What was his story?

At first reluctant to talk about the matter, the old-timers eventually unwound and told him, but they did so quietly and with respect, speaking of Gillis almost with reverence. They did admit he had shot himself but were reluctant to say more. Eventually, though, Cline persuaded them to tell him the story.

Jack Gillis, they told him, was a man from Prince Edward Island who had fallen in love with a girl of a social station higher than his. She loved him in return. Her parents, though, did not approve of young Jack and forbade the match.

Jack had left Prince Edward Island in the 1850s, determined to make his fortune in the California gold creeks and then return, famous and wealthy, to claim the girl as his bride. He went by schooner to New York and then down to the Panama isthmus, which he walked across. Arriving too late for the California Gold Rush, he went north to the Fraser River in 1858 and then farther north to the Cariboo. He always seemed to have bad luck, being all too often late for the richest pickings. He was one of those people who always seemed to be in the right place at the wrong time. His bad fortune became well known. He grew dour and unsociable. Years passed. Eventually he came to the Omineca. Always he kept the image of his girl in Prince Edward Island alive in his mind and dreamed of making his fortune.



Detail from a map of the Omineca mining district showing Manson Creek, other gold mining centres and Gillis's Grave in the lower quarter. *Topographical Sketch Map of Omineca and Finlay River Basins* (detail), 1917, Northern BC Archives & Special Collections, University of Northern British Columbia

his disappointed hand. It was indeed from his girl in Prince Edward Island. She had written that, though she still loved him tenderly, she could wait no longer and, in her loneliness, was marrying another.

So great was the sadness of his friends and their respect for his long-lasting fidelity to his girl that they sent Gillis's gold to her. But they would not put their names on the package as senders, because the prospect of receiving a faltering letter of thanks from a heartbroken girl unnerved them.

In honour of his memory, the prospectors maintained his grave over the years. It became a well-known landmark near the junction of the Manson and Pinchbeck trails. In 1897, when William Gordon, suspected of murdering his partner Isaac Jones, was arrested and interrogated in Hazelton, he said he had last seen Jones at Gillis's Grave.<sup>2</sup>

It is a sweet story of many years of single-minded endeavour and disappointed love. It is also a testament to the respect and sentimentality of the mining community.

Then, suddenly, against the odds, he found gold. As he was accumulating a fortune of, reportedly, \$10,000, he became more sociable, popular even. He talked of returning to Prince Edward Island to claim his bride.

One day in 1871, the old-timers told Cline, Jack Gillis was on the trail not far from Manson Creek, carrying his gold, returning to Prince Edward Island to claim and marry his girl. He and his companions met a man bringing in the mail. There was a letter for Jack with familiar handwriting on the envelope. His companions teased him, saying it was from his bride-to-be and that wedding bells would soon be ringing. They saw him open it. Then Jack trembled violently. He snarled at his companions to stay back, put his gun to his head and pulled the trigger.

His friends buried him at the spot, erected a headboard and built a wooden palisade around the grave. His companions read the letter that had fallen from

his disappointed hand. It was indeed from his girl in Prince Edward Island. She had written that, though she still loved him tenderly, she could wait no longer and, in her loneliness, was marrying another.

So great was the sadness of his friends and their respect for his long-lasting fidelity to his girl that they sent Gillis's gold to her. But they would not put their names on the package as senders, because the prospect of receiving a faltering letter of thanks from a heartbroken girl unnerved them.

In honour of his memory, the prospectors maintained his grave over the years. It became a well-known landmark near the junction of the Manson and Pinchbeck trails. In 1897, when William Gordon, suspected of murdering his partner Isaac Jones, was arrested and interrogated in Hazelton, he said he had last seen Jones at Gillis's Grave.<sup>2</sup>

It is a sweet story of many years of single-minded endeavour and disappointed love. It is also a testament to the respect and sentimentality of the mining community.

Prospectors, Cline wrote, did not wear their hearts on their sleeves and were not overtly sentimental, but here was a story that proved their compassionate hearts.

Alas for romance, this story may not be true. In 1971, Cecil Clark, a provincial police inspector, became suspicious and thought he would check the facts. How much did \$10,000 in gold weigh? How did Gillis carry it? Something didn't add up. He searched for the papers and found out that the six-man coroner's jury at the time concluded that Gillis had indeed killed himself at that spot in 1871 but had done so in a temporary fit of insanity. The coroner, William Fitzgerald, noted that the letter from Gillis's girl had said nothing that would have led Gillis to kill himself. She had not, he implied, told him she was abandoning him to marry another. Clark was also ungentlemanly enough to doubt whether a girl would wait over a dozen years for her boyfriend to make his fortune in the notoriously uncertain endeavour of prospecting for gold.<sup>3</sup> And what really did happen to the gold Gillis was reportedly bringing out with him?

Clark came closer to the truth, but even he did not tell the full story. For one thing, the shooting happened in 1872. For another, the man's name was Hugh Gillis, although he was commonly called Jack. Born in Prince Edward Island in 1835, he and his brother Benedict had ended up in Quesnel, where Gillis had owned the Occidental Hotel with his partner Thomas Brown since early 1866.

The discovery of gold on Vital Creek had drawn Gillis north. He went to try his prospecting luck in the creeks and also to find a way of relieving successful prospectors of any wealth in gold they might have found. As early as 1870, Gillis opened a saloon in the mining community of Omineca. This, though, may have been no more than a board across two barrels in a lean-to at a shack in a town that some described as a "big town with nothing in it."<sup>4</sup>

The papers from the inquest on Gillis's death tell a more credible story.<sup>5</sup> In August 1872, Gillis and a fellow prospector named George Mitchell rode from Dunkeld just south of Manson Creek to the first pack train camp. This was at Harper's Cattle Camp, seventeen miles south of Dunkeld. Mitchell said Gillis had been uncommunicative on the ride up, giving merely yes and no answers.

On August 19, Gillis was at the camp with Mitchell and a man named Adam McNeily. Before supper that evening, Gillis took a letter from his pocket and read it by the fire. Mitchell testified that Gillis told him the letter was from his sister.

Mitchell called out to him that the supper was getting cold. Gillis replied that it made no difference as it would all be cold shortly. He then put the letter on the fire. After supper, he lit his pipe and walked away from camp for about forty yards. "I saw him with a pair of socks in his hand," Mitchell said, "and after some time he took off his coat and boots. I did not think anything strange in this proceeding as I thought he was going to change his socks."<sup>6</sup>



Gillis called out to Mitchell and told him to tell his brother to telegraph Tom (likely his business partner Thomas Brown) to come home immediately.

Mitchell then saw he had a pistol in his hand. He grasped at once what was happening and moved slowly toward Gillis, asking him what he was intending to do. Gillis said he was going to shoot himself. "For God's sake, Jack," Mitchell said. "Don't shoot yourself."<sup>7</sup> To keep him talking, Mitchell asked him why he was doing it. Gillis said people at Germansen Creek were slandering him. When Gillis said that he would rather die than be slandered, Mitchell said that it meant nothing. Many a good man had been slandered. Mitchell was edging closer, but now Gillis told him to stop. "Jack," Mitchell said, "I would like to say a few words to you before you die, as I have always been good friends with you."<sup>8</sup> Gillis replied that Mitchell was a good man and he was sorry the deed had to be done in his presence, but it had to be done.

Gillis said he had a small amount of gold dust and asked Mitchell to send it to his brother. He then said, "I forgive all my enemies and hope they will forgive me and may God have mercy on my soul."<sup>9</sup>

McNeily, who was also witnessing what was happening, testified, "He then raised the pistol towards his face. Afterwards he took it away from that and placed it by the side of his head and held it there for three or four seconds and fired."<sup>10</sup> Mitchell, who was twenty yards away, then went over and discharged the five loaded chambers of the pistol into the air.

The inquest was held on August 21, 1872. The jury found Gillis had died while labouring under a temporary fit of insanity. No mention was made of any gold he may have been carrying.

Gillis had been thirty-seven years old. Of the approximately \$7,000 he owned at his death, \$5,000 was tied up in the hotel. He died intestate, and his brother Benedict administered his estate.

But what about the respect for Gillis's Grave? And its careful maintenance? Why would people have chosen to rebuild and repaint this grave but no one else's on the trail? Sperry Cline suggested it was out of respect for Gillis's dedication and fidelity to his girl. A more likely, albeit less romantic, explanation is that the grave became a well-known landmark on the trail and was marked on maps to inform and help travellers know where they were and which trail to take. Conceivably it was maintained as a public good to help travellers.

In his 1954 biography, *Son of the North*, Charles Camsell, the noted geologist and commissioner of the Northwest Territories, told the same story Cline did.<sup>11</sup> The tale told by Sperry Cline seems to have become a legend of the North.

But could it be true? Could it be that the letter Gillis threw in the fire was not in fact from his sister but was indeed from his fiancée, breaking off the

engagement? In the tale they told Cline, could the old-time prospectors have merely been embroidering the basic facts of a true story? Was there, after all, somewhere in Prince Edward Island a girl who remembered her long-lost love and repented her letter?