



A HUNDRED YEARS OF YUKON MAGIC

An excerpt from
Great Rams IV

BY
Robert M. Anderson

The guide could pack the rest of the critter, but O'Connor himself wanted to lug that record head

“It had been very cold the night before— one of those chill and bitter sub-arctic nights when the radiance of the northern lights on the horizon looked like the distant glow of a great city and the burning streams of the Aurora Borealis wove great patterns against the black, star-spangled sky. But by this time, the sun was well up. It was warm and in the direct sunlight the frost was melting. We were right at timberline, on a level with the last scattered black spruce. It was a wonderful day. We had seen the sheep before they had seen us. We had plenty of time. The air was like spiced wine and life was wonderful.”

Rarely was Jack O'Connor, the Grand Old Man of North American sheep hunting,

O'Connor packing out his “white sheep” from the December 1945 issue of *Outdoor Life*.

so effusive as in these opening comments of a yarn he called “Shooting Gallery Rams,” the story of a Dall’s sheep hunt he made with friends in Yukon Territory in the fall of 1956. The trip, his fourth to the Yukon, was one that O’Connor had put together himself with friends Fred Huntington, owner of RCBS, *Outdoor Life* editor Bill Rae, and another friend, Red Cole. He set the hunt up with famous outfitters Davis and Berard, with whom he had made an earlier, highly successful Dall’s sheep hunt in 1950 and taken perhaps his greatest sheep trophy, a Dall’s ram that officially scored 177-1/8 B&C and was listed at No. 12 in the very first modern Boone and Crockett record book (1952), the first such book to utilize the current scoring system, designed in 1950 by Dr. James L. Clark and Grancel Fitz.

During the two and a half years of research that went into *Jack O’Connor: The Legendary Life of America’s Greatest Gunwriter* (2002), I became much more aware of certain, mostly unstated, passions of O’Connor’s hunting life. Of course, there was his long-running love affair with North American sheep hunting. But, in particular, his favorite sheep hunting destination was Yukon Territory. Between 1945 and 1972, O’Connor hunted in the Yukon on six different occasions—in 1945, 1949, 1950, 1956, 1963, and 1972—over a period of twenty-seven years. Rams were the primary focus on all these trips.

His first hunt to the Yukon, in 1945, was, along with his British Columbia hunt one year later, in 1946, the two most successful hunts of his entire sheep hunting career. He collected three fine Dall’s rams on the Yukon hunt, and this put him in position to complete three Grand Slams (a then-unknown term

as it applied to sheep hunting) with the three great Stone’s rams he would collect on British Columbia’s Prophet Bench in August and September of 1946.

O’Connor’s quarter-century, and not-too-well-known, itch to kill a big Fannin’s ram was almost always in at least the back of his mind on his Yukon hunts, although most of these took place in classic Dall’s sheep country.

But O’Connor’s fascination with the Yukon was fueled by many other factors than just hunting. It must be remembered that O’Connor, grump though he often was, was also an incurable romantic to the core. Long before his opportunity to hunt in the Yukon materialized, O’Connor was a thorough student of Yukon history. For all his life, he remained fascinated by prospecting and prospectors as well as self-made men in various other fields. In O’Connor’s first novel, *Conquest* (1930), the main character, Jard Pendleton, was such a man, an almost subhuman murderer who literally tore success from the Mexicans, native peoples, and the very soil of old Arizona. In his second novel, *Boomtown* (1938), his hero was Frank O’Reilly, a down-to-his-last-nickel prospector before making a giant silver strike.

The lure of riches and the brutal, rugged, primal men who answered the far-away call of Yukon gold in 1898 intrigued O’Connor, as did their vast energies and near-the-surface violence. O’Connor had seen a few such types in the old Arizona of his boyhood. To be sure, this intrigue was vicarious in nature, although he was certainly no shrinking violet. Fortunately, and juxtaposed with his romanticism, O’Connor had a very practical side that served him well for all his life. Still, all aspects of the Yukon fired

his vivid imagination, and when all the votes were in, his 1945 Yukon expedition—for it truly was an expedition—may have been his favorite in a lifetime of wonderful hunts.

O’Connor decided to cast his 1945 Yukon hunting lot with the Jacquot brothers, two hard-bitten little French chefs who had come from Alsace-Lorraine by way of ship to California. They were also caught up in the gold fever and made their way to the Yukon by steamer in 1898, and then over Chilkoot Pass. After a turn at prospecting, they turned to their old profession as cooks, later establishing a trading post at Kluane Lake. Still later they went into the

Columbia, he enjoyed two and a half days of it, reveling in the wonderful meals, the extra desserts, the coffee-anytime, the shoeshines, and all the small favors and courtesies from conductor, chef, and accommodating porters. Then there were the hours and hours of simply watching the scenery, some of the most beautiful in the American West, roll by. This travel fed O’Connor’s romantic, dreamer’s soul.

In Vancouver he met up with his hunting partner, N. Myles Brown. Brown owned a pneumatic tool company in Cleveland, Ohio, and was the first man that O’Connor ever referred to as a “tycoon,” a

In that long-ago golden era of pack train hunting...Yukon Territory...offered incomparable sporting experiences. In today’s world of brain-cracking pressure, warp-speed living, instant (or faster) gratification, and declining values, such experiences are as gone as the Great Auk.

outfitting business as a sideline. There were only two or three other outfitters in the Yukon at this time. The gold had long since petered out, a 1918 flu epidemic had decimated much of the Yukon’s Indian population, and many areas of the Yukon were almost uninhabited. I am not sure how and why O’Connor chose the Jacquot brothers, but certainly all of the correspondence regarding the planning of the hunt was by tedious and slow mail, requiring a month to send a letter and receive an answer. In today’s Instagram world, such delays are hard to fathom.

O’Connor also loved luxury train travel. From Tucson to Vancouver, British

term he would come to use frequently in later years. Myles Brown was a huge man who in no way resembled a sheep hunter. But he was a gentle soul and became a beloved friend of O’Connor’s.

A day after arrival in Vancouver, O’Connor and Brown embarked on a Canadian Pacific steamer up the Inside Passage to Skagway, Alaska. (At one time, I knew the steamer’s name, but it is gone forever). I have neglected to mention that O’Connor also loved the ocean and, during the voyage, spent many always-cold hours walking the decks, breathing the damp salt air, watching the coastline, the gulls, and the water, and probably thinking about

MORE ON THE YUKON

In *Great Rams IV* you'll read about the trip taken by B&C's Vice President of Big Game Records Buck Buckner at the request of Bradford, Cathy, and Caroline O'Connor to scatter the ashes of their parents Jack and Eleanor in the Yukon, one of Jack's favorite hunting destinations. Also included in the Yukon chapter are in-depth sidebars and photo galleries of two legendary Yukon guides, Johnnie Johns and Alex Van Bibber.



Jack London, one of his literary heroes. This voyage took four and a half days.

After arrival in Skagway, the two men spent another day and a half before boarding the White Pass and Yukon narrow-gauge railroad (more daydreaming for Jack) for the journey to Whitehorse, Yukon Territory. After a day in Whitehorse, meeting Jean Jacquot and getting squared away, they were finally on their way by the most primitive of roads to the Jacquots' trading post and headquarters at Kluane Lake. This part of O'Connor's journey, from his departure in Tucson until his arrival at the Jacquots' headquarters, took eleven days. Brown's journey from Cleveland to Vancouver, also by train, took somewhat longer.

Yukon sheep hunts of the day were not odysseys to be entered into lightly.

I have gone to considerable length in describing O'Connor's and Brown's in-bound journey to their Yukon hunting destination because their travel so typified both the inward and homeward bound segments of all extended Yukon hunts of the period. From the inception of sport hunting beginning in the years immediately after World War I, if you went to the Yukon to hunt, that was the way you did it.

During the years from 1898 until the beginning of World War I, market hunting and hunting to feed mine workers had taken its toll on game populations. But by the time that O'Connor and Brown arrived in August of 1945, mining operations had ceased and the Yukon was once again a big game hunter's paradise. The limit on rams was two. However, O'Connor also had

a special museum permit that allowed him to collect a third ram. He killed three mountain caribou, moose, at least two black bear, and at least three grizzlies. Grizzlies were considered vermin, and there was no closed season. Although O'Connor had taken an enormous grizzly two years before in Alberta, he never saw a grizzly that he wasn't mad at. His lifetime take on grizzlies was at least thirteen.

The 1952 Boone and Crockett record book lists 45 Dall's sheep heads. Twenty of those are listed as being taken in Yukon Territory. But a careful perusal of those 20 listings and the hunters who collected these trophies reveals something of a who's who of the significant "client" big game hunters of the day, many of them well-to-do doctors, business executives, and other professionals from the East Coast of the United States. Among those were William N. Beach, Belmore Browne, Grancel Fitz, Dr. John E. Hammett and his sons John E. Hammett Jr. and Richard Hammett, Herb Klein, John and Matthew Lahti, Ernst Von Lengerke (the fifth hunter to take a Grand Slam), and William C. Barthman. Barthman was a sheep hunter of real note in the late 1930s and 1940s. When the 1952 B&C record book came out, Barthman had a bighorn, a Dall's sheep, and a Stone's sheep even before this time and corresponded frequently. O'Connor may well have learned about the Jacquot brothers through Barthman.

For the big game hunter, the Yukon was a hunting paradise. In the golden era of Yukon hunting, or up until the mid-1950s, hunters on a month-long hunt might very well expect to harvest rams, grizzly, black bear, moose, and mountain caribou. No

other big game hunting venue in the United States or elsewhere in Canada could offer such a variety of game. But such hunts took time and were real productions, requiring significant planning and major commitments of equipment, personnel, and very hard work on the part of outfitters. These mixed-bag hunts usually required one or possibly two camp moves to locate different game. The old-days major Yukon outfitters took great pride in providing their clients with not just a hunt but also an *experience*—and, for that matter, the experience of a lifetime, which was what most discriminating sportsmen of the day were looking for anyway. For these and other considerations, outfitters strongly advised their clients to book for a month or, minimally, twenty-one days. When hunting days as well as the necessary travel time to and from these hunts were factored into the time-away-from-home equation, it becomes very easy to see why such wonderful hunts were the domain of the rich or at least the very well-to-do. In most cases, average working-class hunters simply could not afford either the hunt itself or, perhaps more often, the time away from their employment.

In referring to the wealthy men who typified most Yukon outfitters' American clients, O'Connor put it so simply and so well in *Sheep and Sheep Hunting* (1974): "Such hunters were usually men of substance and of taste," he commented, and, further, "Even wealthy men did not go on many hunts."

When O'Connor and Brown arrived back in Whitehorse at the conclusion of their hunt, O'Connor had been away from Tucson for 41 days, and Brown away from Cleveland even longer. They had planned to take the same



Eleanor O'Connor with her award-winning Yukon Dall's sheep taken in August, 1963. The ram has a B&C score of 177-4/8 points and still ranks No. 45 All-time.

From "Hunting on Three Continents with Jack O'Connor, Volume II"

Inside Passage steamer route homeward as before. But in Whitehorse they learned to their delight that they could fly commercially to Fort St. John, British Columbia, and from there on to Vancouver.

While they had been

hunting, World War II had finally and formally ended. All through the war years, *Outdoor Life* had been the magazine selected by the government to be sent each month to all American servicemen in the world, wherever they

might be. From this, O'Connor had developed an enormous following. The eight feature stories that he wrote for the magazine covering his Yukon trip appeared in *Outdoor Life* from January 1946 through September 1946. These stories completed the process of making O'Connor famous. And the Yukon became famous as well!

With the accompanying boom in employment, salaries, and increasing amounts of leisure time during the postwar years, gradually a new type of hunter began to appear on the scene. Demanding, in a hurry, and often rude, this new breed of hunter frequently cared little for the totality of the hunting experience. Their go-go-go attitudes fit perfectly with the

emergence of the small aircraft as a means of access to and from hunting areas. And, sad as it is to say, increasingly such hunters were only interested in sheep.

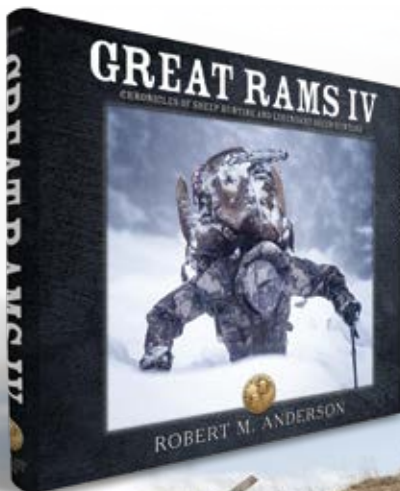
From the days of the Jacquot brothers, Johnnie Johns, the Chambers family, the Desrosiers, Alex Van Bibber, and numerous others to the outfitters of today, such as the Reynolds family, Tim and Jen Mervyn, Chris and Sharon McKinnon, the great hunting utopia that was, and remains, in the Yukon has been inordinately blessed with great stewardship of its fabulous hunting resources.

In that long-ago golden era of pack train hunting, the Canadian provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, and Yukon Territory all offered incomparable sporting experiences. In today's world of brain-cracking pressure, warp-speed living, instant (or faster) gratification, and declining values, such experiences are as gone as the Great Auk. ■

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