

Montreal Gazette October 1, 1980

By ANDREW H.MALCOLM

New York Times

DAWSON, Yukon Territory – Once upon a time there was an advertising executive in a City called Chicago. His job was to make children yell, “Mommy, I want Quaker Puffed Rice!”

For many years, this man told the children his cereal was shot from guns. This helped his sales. But other cereals had talking tigers and gave away prizes in every box. This hurt his sales. What could the poor businessman do?

He needed a new idea. Or else he would need a new job. He had to think of something catchy and simple and it had to do with the cereal’s radio show about a Mountie in the Yukon. Suddenly, the man knew!

In each box of Puffed Rice and Puffed Wheat he would give away a square inch of land in the romantic Yukon right here in Dawson where Sergeant Preston and his trusty dog King had their adventures every week.

And so began the Great Klondike Big Inch land Caper, one of the most successful sales promotions in North American business history.

For long after all the rocket rings and plastic submarines and other cereal-box prizes were lost, millions of those official-looking, legal-sounding, gold-embossed deeds to a square inch of Yukon land remained in drawers, albums, safe deposit boxes, scrapbooks, vaults and, more importantly, in the memory of a generation of men and women not so young anymore.

And given the ravages of the years and the current uncertain economic times, a steadily mounting stream of these former children, their attorneys, their widows and their executors are writing to inquire after their “property,” which they assume has increased in value over all these years.

But, alas, the replies carry sad news. Not only do these people not own the land now. They never did, because each individual deed was never formally registered. The Klondike Big Inch Land Co., an Illinois subsidiary established to handle the cereal’s land affairs, has gone out of business. And anyway, the Canadian government repossessed all the land back in 1965 for nonpayment of \$37.20 in property taxes.

But still, the cereal saga won’t die. Thousands of “owners” have written to officials in the Yukon. A vast, sparsely populated area that is one of two of Canada’s northern territories. “Please tell them to stop.” pleaded Cheryl Lefevre, a land-office clerk who stores the Yukon’s files on the matter, files now more than 18 inches thick.

The land of course, is still here – Group2 in lot 243. It is a 19.11-acre plot on the west bank of the Yukon River about three miles upstream from town where, according to crumbling old records in Dawson's land office, Malcolm McLaren first homesteaded back in 1911.

It is a long way from a suburban Chicago home in 1954, the night before Bruce Baker, the adman was to make his promotional presentation. Before he died three years ago, Baker recounted to a friend his side of the Klondike epic.

Baker was nearly panicked for a new idea, any new idea. When the inspiration came to him, he could almost see the ads: "You'll actually own one square inch of Yukon land in the famous gold country!"

Quaker Oats hated the idea.

Too many potential legal problems, the lawyers said. It would cost far too much to register every deed to every little cereal-eater out there. Baker suggested, then, that they not register the deeds. And he found a Yukon lawyer who thought it was legal. Baker flew to the Yukon and, after a harrowing midwinter boat journey, saw the land and bought it for \$1,000.

Twenty-one million numbered deeds were printed up. And on Jan. 27, 1955, the promotion was begun on the Sergeant Preston radio show.

The response was far beyond Baker's wildest hopes. Quaker's puffed cereal plant in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, could hardly stuff the deeds in fast enough. Within weeks, every box was sold.

As time went on, Quaker redirected its cereal sales. "We do zero promotion now," said Kathy Rand, Quaker's public relations manager. "because we're not positioned for kids. The cereals are no sugar, salt or additives, so they're aimed at babies or the diet conscious."

In 1965, the 19.11 acres were seized. In 1966, the Klondike Big Inch Land Co. was dissolved. There were always some "owners" writing for information. But it built to a flood more recently, involving Canadian consuls general in the United States, the Yukon and even the prime minister's office in Ottawa.

Steven Spoerl wrote Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau to announce he was declaring the formal independence of his four square inches.

Each writer gets a polite reply that refers to Quaker's "promotional gimmick" and suggests they write Chicago.

"The deeds were not meant to have any intrinsic value," Quaker now says, "but rather to give the consumer the romantic appeal of being the owner of a square inch of land in the Yukon."

Ironically, there are reports that-Baker's late-night brainstorm, those 7-by-5-inch deeds that were 35 times larger than the piece of land they represented, are bringing upwards of \$40 in some

antique shops. This means that a worthless piece of paper from a cereal box 25 years ago fetches about \$10 more now than each share of the Quaker Oats Co., which traded last week in the \$30 range.

Are you one of the thousands Who 'own' a Square inch of this picturesque Yukon land?

THE KLONDIKE BIG INCH LAND CO. INC.



"On King! On, you huskies!" Sgt. Preston and Yukon King. Photo Courtesy Family Video, Whitehorse

Dear Sir: (via E-mail. 2000)

I received a Deed of Land in 1955 from the Klondike Big Inch Land Co., Inc. in the city of Whitehorse as a gift which grants to me ALL AND SINGLLAR that certain parcel or tract of land situate. lying and being in the Yukon Territory more particularly known and described as follows:

TRACT NUMBERED Y 634756

Now, I have wondered all these years about this little whiff of a piece of land and finally – through the advent of the internet - I may be able to discover something of its use and/or worth. Who knows? Maybe there's been a gold or oil strike there or maybe the pipeline is built upo it. Are you aware of such a company?

Thank You,

Dan Maloney

Dear Sir

I have a Deed of Land from the Klondike Big Inch Land Co. Inc. for one square inch of land in lot #243 in Group Two (2) in Yukon Territory.

Can you furnish me any information on the Tract of land which is part of 19.11 acres? This deed of land was issued tome in 1-4-55.

This land is located near Dawson near the Yukon River, please answer soon or forward this letter to the proper place.

Thank You.

Eugene Kerr

Well, probably the best-documented article concerning the Klondike Big Inch Land Co. Inc. was written in 1975 by Jack McIver for CANADIAN MAGAZINE. It's a fascinating story and bears repeating, so here it is, just keep in mind it was written 25 years ago and some of the people mentioned in the article may now be in different circumstances.

By Jack McIver

This is a story about a bathroom, a Mountie, several hundred tons of breakfast cereal, a Canadian senator, a television game show, a murder, 21 million square inches of Yukon Territory land, a severe case of frostbite, and an advertising campaign that should have died 20 years ago - but didn't

First, the bathroom. We lake you back to the fall of 1954, to Lake Forest. Ill. and the home of Chicago advertising executive Bruce Baker. It is 3 o'clock in the morning. Baker, creative director for the ad agency of Wherry, Baker & Tilden, can't sleep. He is a desperate man. He is, as he recalls the moment today, "sitting in the can, smoking three cigarettes at once - well, at least two" (He is desperate, but not suicidal.)

One of Wherry, Baker & Tilden's clients is the Quaker Oats Co., the Chicago-based firm that fires Puffed Wheat, Puffed Rice and a variety of other ready-to-eat cereals from cannons. But the breakfast cereal market is a highly competitive one, and the cannon gimmick is wearing a bit thin. Some cereal manufacturers have hired tigers and bears to promote their products; others are luring customers by stuffing their boxes with premiums - whistles and marbles, buttons and soldiers, plastic airplanes and baking-soda-powered submarines. Quaker Oats has tried toy cannons that actually shoot cereal across the kitchen, and rings with prisms that can actually burn holes in Mom's tablecloth, but they haven't gone over too well - Mom, after all, is the one who buys the stuff, and the kids weren't yelling loud enough for it. "Besides," Baker remembers, "these plastic whistles and things were worth about 5 cents each. I had to come up with something that didn't cost too much."

Back to the bathroom: Baker also wants a promotional scheme that will tie in with Sgt. Preston of the Yukon, the radio (and later, TV) show sponsored by Quaker Oats. It stars Richard Simmons as a handsome, burly, moustached Mountie who always gets his man and never gets his scarlet tunic mussed. Sgt. Preston has a team of huskies led by Yukon King ("On King! On, you huskies!") The show, which originates on WXYZ radio in Detroit, is broadcast by stations across the U.S., and Canada, and the kids love it. Now, thinks Baker, if only they'd love Quaker Oats products. Or at least buy them...

Few such instances are recorded, but it's likely that many of mankind's greatest discoveries originated in a bathroom. Remember Archimedes? Baker can't recall if he yelled "Eureka!" when the idea finally came to him, but he knew it was a good one. A great one. "I took the 5 am. train in to Chicago and my art director and I went to work on it right away. By 11 o'clock, I was at Quaker Oats with the presentation."

Baker's plan was this: Quaker Oats would buy a parcel of land in Sgt Preston's Yukon Territory, subdivide it into square-inch lots, and give the lots away to buyers of Puffed Wheat Puffed Rice and other Quaker cereals. (Baker was partly inspired by a story that had run in Life magazine a few years earlier: a Texan had become a millionaire by selling - for \$10 each - square-inch pieces of land in his state to expatriate Texans.) It would be a totally legal transfer of land: every kid who dug to the bottom of his or her cereal box would find a deed to one square inch of Yukon property. Lawyers would draw up the deeds. They'd be "gold-embossed," and have loads of legalistic fine print on them. And a corporate seal. And a place to put the new owner's name. The kids would actually own a genuine piece of Canadian Gold Rush land. Sgt. Preston land. Yukon King land. They'd go crazy trying to get them! Quaker Oats would conquer the cereal market! The world!

Quaker Oats hated the idea.

It was impossible, the company's lawyers told Baker. Registering the deeds to millions of tiny tots, even if it could be done, would cost the company a fortune.

Then we won't register them, said Baker.

Forget it, said the lawyers.

But he wouldn't forget it. In early October, 1954, Baker, his brother John (a lawyer, now retired), and a Quaker Oats advertising executive chartered a plane and flew to the Yukon, looking for land.

In Whitehorse, the three introduced themselves to George Van Roggen, a young lawyer who is today a Canadian senator. He had a law practice in Whitehorse with Erik Nielsen (now MP for the Yukon), and although he left the Yukon in 1957 and now practices in Vancouver, Van Roggen remembers the incident well - and fondly: "As a staid lawyer, I found the antics of these ad guys from Chicago most entertaining, certainly more so than drawing up wills. In the U.S., there'd be very little legal difficulty in dividing land into one-inch parcels, but they wanted to know if, in Canada, you could give away deeds that couldn't be individually registered. We gave the opinion that you could, that they'd be legal."

Van Roggen also found Baker his land, 19 acres of government property seven miles up the Yukon River from Dawson. By then, Baker had convinced Quaker Oats that the promotion would work, and the company bought the land for \$1000. Van Roggen drove the men from Whitehorse to Dawson ("He was absolutely intrigued by the whole thing," says Baker), and in the early, frigid hours of Thursday, Oct. 7, the three set out in an open skiff to inspect their

property. “It was,” Baker says, “the most exciting day of my life.” He has a wooden leg today to prove it.

Their guide for the trip up river was Constable Paul LeCocq, a real, live Mountie from Montreal who was stationed in Dawson. LeCocq, Baker remembers, actually had a team of huskies led by a lead dog named Yukon King, and he received all the fan mail addressed to Sgt Preston of the Yukon.

John Baker, the lawyer, kept a diary of their trip to the Yukon. Here’s an excerpt from that fateful Thursday:

“We arose at about 5:15 am., and after getting dressed found it was still dark. It was several degrees below zero. Finally Paul appeared in his pickup truck. We bundled up as well as we could and went down to the river it’s a forbidding sight with ice cakes zooming by at about six miles per hour... We didn’t have enough weight in the bow and the wake sprayed up over Paul and froze as it hit him - his leather jacket was soon completely covered with ice. Paul told us a human being couldn’t last more than three minutes in the water. We manoeuvred upstream against the swift current for about 40 minutes and came to a point opposite the land in question. Poul turned in toward shore and suddenly -Crash! - we smashed up on a rock. About 15 gallons of water came in over the stern and immediately turned to ice in the bottom of the boat. We then paddled in about 50 yards, went ashore, and examined the motor - the shear pin had broken and we had no spare...”

They made a hurried inspection of the Quaker Oats property – “fairly level with a beach of stones about 100 feet wide; quite thick with jackpine and spruce, poplar and birch” - and headed back, wet and cold, to Dawson, drifting with the current.

“I remember there were all these old guys, real Gabby Hayes types, living in cabins along the river,” laughs Baker. “They must have wondered what was going on as we floated on by dressed in Brooks Bros. suits and chesterfield costs. We had no hats, and were just wearing shoes - no boots.

“The current was so strong that when we got to Dawson, we couldn’t stop. We just shot right by the town. I kept thinking I was going to wind up dead somewhere in the Arctic Circle. Finally the current changed, and we made it to shore.”

Bruce Baker’s feet were badly frostbitten, and complications years later led to the recent amputation of his right leg below the knee.

“when we got back,” he says, “we headed straight for the bar in the hotel and proceeded to get pickled on 180-proof rum.

“I wanted to get a picture of Paul in his Mountie uniform, the red, dress one, and I remember my brother and I trying to get him into it. I don’t think he’d worn it since he was in police school, and he’d gained weight by then.” Baker left LeCocq with some postcards of Sgt. Preston of the

Yukon, and they headed back to Chicago, ready to launch what became one of the most successful promotions in advertising history.

100 YEARS

1950 ~ 1979

Whitehorse Star ~ Friday, August 18, 2000 217

QUAKER OATS STRIKES GOLD IN THE KLONDIKE



A Promotion where everyone could own a piece of "Sgt. Preston country." Photo Courtesy of Ken Elliott

John Baker and George Van Roggen drew up the deeds for the giveaway scheme. "They were very carefully worded," says Van Roggen. "Everything had to be absolutely legal - the competition in the food business was so strenuous that your competitors would try to get you on any small technicality."

The deeds excluded mineral rights: although the area had by then been stripped of gold, they didn't want deed owners trying to mine their square-inch properties. It was also stipulated that owners had to allow perpetual access, or "easement," across their land to others who might wish to visit their own inches.

Quaker Oats formed a subsidiary, the Klondike Big Inch Land Co., incorporated in Illinois, to handle the promotion; Baker's deeds could now be decorated with an official-looking corporate seal.

The subdivision plan was a problem. Van Roggen explains: "I just visualized that we would have a land surveyor divide the land into parcels. But 21 million deeds were printed, which takes up several acres of land. And since it would take a square inch of paper to mark in the deed number, we'd have to have a subdivision plan the same number of acres in size."

A solution was reached: the deeds were numbered consecutively, according to a master plan. If you wanted to find, say, lot number 11,935,000 you simply had to start in the northwest corner of the land, travel east 7,000 inches, go south 1,705 inches, and there you'd be, standing on your inch. "Theoretically," says Van Roggen, "you could find any square inch in the subdivision."

Nobody, as far as Baker knows, accepted the challenge.

The promotion was first announced on the Sgt. Preston network radio show on Jan. 27, 1955. At the same time, advertisements ("You'll actually own one square inch of Yukon land in the famous gold country!") appeared in 93 newspapers.

The public response outdistanced Baker's wildest dreams. Quaker Oats cereal sold as quickly as the deeds could be printed and stuffed into the boxes. Grocers set up special Quaker Oats displays.

On the television game show Truth or Consequences, a contestant pulled a deed from a box of Puffed Wheat. His "consequence," the host told him, was that during the next week he'd be flown to the Yukon to pan for gold on his square-inch property (although the deed said he couldn't). A film crew accompanied the man and the following week, sure enough, a film of the contestant making a fool of himself in the Canadian North was shown on network television. Quaker Oats didn't mind at all.

The promotion made the front page of a Buffalo newspaper: "There was a man on trial there for murdering his wife with an ice pick," says Baker. "On about the third day of the trial, the defence attorney made a motion that he be allowed to withdraw from the case. Apparently his client had told him that he owned all this property in the Yukon the attorney assumed that payment would be no problem. Then he found out that the man's property consisted of about 1,000 Quaker Oats deeds he had collected.

Letters from new landowners flooded the Quaker Oats offices. "Where exactly," thousands of children asked, "is my inch located?" "How much is it worth?" One youngster sent in four toothpicks and a piece of string and asked the Quaker people to erect a fence around his property.

"Interest in the promotion," says Baker, "was unbelievable."

A follow-up campaign offered cereal eaters a one-ounce "poke" pouch of genuine Yukon dirt" for 25 cents -it, too, was a success. To Senator Van Roggen, it was the fun part:

"I called a fellow I knew in Dawson and told him to sift four tons of sand from the bed of the Klondike River. It had to be pebble-free, and I wanted him to store it in a warm warehouse. I

couldn't tell him, though, what we wanted it for. The people up there thought he'd gone out of his mind.

The sand was trucked to Whitehorse, packed into pouches, then sent overland to Anchorage, Alaska. It had to be mailed from there because of postal difficulties in sending it from Canada, but the Anchorage postmark didn't seem to bother the recipients: "Americans all think that the Klondike is in Alaska, anyway," says Van Roggen.

And so it went - newspaper articles, advertising awards, photographs of Mae West holding a Klondike Big Inch Land Co. deed and a poke of genuine Yukon dirt, and letters, letters, letters. More publicity than Baker, sitting in his bathroom at night, had ever imagined.

And, he points out, the promotion cost "next to nothing - about \$10,000 plus printing costs."

But all good things, alas, must come to an end. Or so Quaker Oats thought. The Sgt. Preston show went off the air in the late 1950s. Actor Richard Simmons now owns a country club in California. Yukon King died. Bruce Baker, now 62, has retired to his home in Lake Forest. The Klondike Big Inch Land Co., kept alive for a number of years to handle inquiries, was dissolved a decade ago. And the 19 wilderness acres of Yukon land were repossessed by the Canadian government several years ago for non-payment of \$37.20 in taxes, although a Quaker Oats spokesman in Chicago claims the company never received a tax bill.

Yes, Quaker Oats would like to forget the whole thing now. But it can't. Unlike plastic whistles, airplanes and similar premiums, the Yukon land deeds weren't, it seems, played with for a week and thrown away. People stuffed them into cookie jars, photo albums, drawers and safety deposit boxes instead. You don't, after all, toss out a "gold-embossed" deed to land, even if it is just for one square inch. Who knows, it might be worth something some day. And so, thousands of people - no one knows how many - squirrelled them away and forgot about them. For a while...

Quaker Oats now receives hundreds of inquiries every year, from kids who have grown up and rediscovered a deed, and from executors of estates - many of them attorneys - who have come across a Big Inch deed in a deceased's belongings. How much, they all want to know, is this land worth now? Is the deed genuine? Are there taxes owing on the land? Where exactly is it located?

The Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development in Ottawa, has also had to deal with hundreds of letters over the years. Here's an excerpt from one:

"I would like you so answer me as I would like to know how much money this in worth. I sure could use this money on a down payment on a house."

And this, from a man in Texas who could neither type nor spell very well:

"So I have desides to sent you a copy (of the deed) instead of tiping all this.

I am keeping the original. I haven't heard from them anymore and want to know if this is a foney Deed.

And what uses is required.

And what percent of the income on, it I get as I am the 'Grantie' of the second part, so for I haven't got any part.

Want you check on this for me and let me know right a way. Thank you."

And this, from an optimist:

"I would like to take a trip to Canada sometime this fall. Would it be possible to tell me what exact transportation (either railroad or bus) that I can take to inspect my property? Where could I stay?"

Officials in Ottawa, only slightly amused, refer all correspondents to the Quaker Oats Co. in Chicago. And Quaker has the unhappy - and the time consuming - task of telling them that the deeds are worthless, that the Klondike Big Inch Co. no longer exists, and that the Canadian government has taken back the land.

Quaker has been threatened with lawsuits over the matter, and is tired of the time and expense required to answer letters. Quaker executives cringe at the mention of the promotion. John Rourke, the company's public relations director, claims that they "probably wouldn't get into such a campaign today because of the legal ramifications."

It's unlikely, however, that a lawsuit would proceed very far; since the Klondike Big Inch Land Co. has been dissolved, there's nobody left to sue. In effect, it would be like suing a dead person who has left no assets.

That's the bad news. The good news is that, thanks to the nostalgia boom, a number of memorabilia experts claim the old deeds are now worth as much as \$40 each to collectors.

And Bruce Baker, the man who started it, takes special delight in pointing out that that makes the deeds worth about twice as much as a share of stock in the Quaker Oats Co.

So there you have it. No Klondike property but a nice bit of memorabilia, and things could be worse. Additional information I have tells of one American gentleman who travelled all over the United States collecting these deeds until he had 10,880. He figured that amounted to about 75 square feet of land and wrote to the Quaker Oats legal department wondering if he could consolidate the different inches into one big chunk. He said he would prefer a piece of land "near the water" and "as quiet an area as possible." Needless to say he was quite perturbed when he found the deeds were worthless.

Lifestyles

Quaker Oats Klondike deed scam still Sizzling

By Dave White

Yukon News Reporter

Two weeks ago a man from De Land, Florida wrote to the Yukon land titles office asking what had happened to his 11 square inches of the Klondike. That may seem like an unusual request but the employees at land titles answer calls and letters every year from people across North America wondering how much their square inch of land is worth.

Last year they received about a dozen written requests from people in Alabama, West Virginia and Quebec, to name but a few.

None of them actually own land in the Yukon. But they do have a deed from the Klondike Big Inch Land Co. which says the bearer owns one square inch of land and until the tax man caught up with the company, they did.

In 1955 the Quaker Oats cereal company in Chicago, Ill. was looking for a promotional gimmick.

The company sponsored the popular radio show "Sgt. Preston of the Yukon" and wanted to tie their promotion in with the new television show of the same name.

A Chicago advertising company came up with an idea that the company would buy a parcel of land in the Yukon, Sgt. Preston's home turf, divide it into one-inch plots and give away deeds to the land in boxes of Quaker Oats cereals.

So the company paid \$1,000 for 19.11 acres located seven miles from Dawson City up the Yukon River. The legal problems of registering the millions of deeds was solved by Whitehorse lawyer George Van Roggen.

Quaker Oats incorporated the Klondike Big Inch Land Co. in Illinois and 21 million deeds were placed in 21 million boxes of cereal.

The promotion was wildly successful. Customers snapped up the cereal as fast as it could be made.

In fact a follow-up promotion selling Klondike River sand -- 25 cents for a One-ounce "poke" -- was also a winner.

For the cereal company it was a great gimmick.

After selling all of the boxes containing the deeds, the company forgot about its Yukon land.

It also forgot to pay taxes on the land and in 1965 the Canadian government seized the land for non-payment of \$37.20 in taxes

Some of the title holders weren't as quick to forget about their own deeds.

The land titles office has a stack of files containing hundreds of letters from people who want to know what happened to their inch of the Yukon.

I own deed no. W 8842824," wrote David Frei, of Mill Valley, California, in 1963. I would like to know if it is still mine or what happened to it? Also where is it located; on a glacier, under a river or a rock."

Las Vegas resident Curtis Gordon wrote in 1982: "I am enclosing a copy of one of the deeds that I have had since the 1950s...I am going to travel up there next year and would like to see it."

Other title holders worried about the taxes on the land. Several wrote asking for details on how they could pay their taxes and keep their land while others wanted to know about mineral rights.

Erwin Von-Mehlem thought he had the whole thing figured out in 1975. The Willowdale, Ont. man sent a cheque for \$37.20 to "ease the burden on the corporation (Klondike Big Inch Land) by making this an offer to purchase."

The land titles office responds to the inquiries with a letter describing the seizure of the land, along with some past newspaper articles on the history of the Quaker Oats promotion.

Some of the deed holders are reluctant to give tip title to the land.

Charles Matznick, of Detroit, wrote several letters in the mid-60s and at one point threatened legal action if he wasn't given title to the land.

On Jan. 4, 1965 the commissioner of the Yukon and the Prime Minister of Canada received letters from Iowa resident Steven T. Spoorl and John A. Zook.

"This is to inform you that certain areas located between Dawson and Whitehorse...hereafter to be referred to as Xanadu, hereby declare themselves free and independant from the Yukon Territory, the Dominion of Canada and the British Commonwealth of Nations."

Commissioner G.R. Cameron took the request seriously enough to write the federal department of Northern Affairs and National Resources to inform them that “a state of emergency now exists between the Dominion of Canada and the State of Xanadu.”

“In order to avoid alarming the populace, a suitable release is being prepared for the local Newspaper,” wrote Cameron. Not all of the requests are as colourful as the kings of Xanadu.

These days most of them come from people who found the deed among the papers of a deceased relative.

They want to know if the deed is any good or if the land is still there.

Sgt. Preston is gone and the land near Dawson belongs to someone else now but all is not lost.

On the collectibles market, the Quaker Oats Yukon deeds are worth about \$35.

R. Joe Sullivan
River City Journal

Those of us who throw away stuff thank those who keep everything.

Particularly when your memory is about as reliable as a tomcat given the responsibility of babysitting a canary.

Bob Ruff of Cape Girardeau was quick to respond to my plea in last week's column for information about that square inch of land I said I owned in Alaska's gold territory. Remember? The offer came on a cereal box in the 1950s. Kellogg's, I said.

Ruff's response was not only a random act of kindness, it was a gentle reminder about my old-timer's affliction. Of everything I remembered about the cereal company's land giveaway, I got the decade right.

Thank goodness my mind isn't completely shot. Yet.

Bob Ruff obviously can be counted among that half of the population known as keepers. The other half falls into the category of discarders. Fortunately, the two tend to balance each other. Otherwise, we would either be smothered with old baby clothes and report cards or totally devoid of any nostalgic memorabilia.

In our home, I am the discarder, and my wife is the keeper. As many times as we have moved over the past 32 years, you would think we would lighten the load and get rid of some stuff -- no, a lot of stuff.

All of this explains why I no longer have the deed to my square inch of valuable land. And Bob Ruff does.

Ruff left a packet of information for me, and it brought back lots of 40-year-old memories.

Included was a copy of the front and back of the deed he was issued in 1955 by the Klondike Big Inch Land Co. Inc. as the result of an offer on a Quaker Oats Co. (does that sound like Kellogg's to you?) cereal box.

It looks mighty official to me.

Also in the packet was a copy of a letter Ruff sent to the Quaker Oats folks in 1988, inquiring about the status of his square inch of land -- in the Yukon Territory of Canada, not in Alaska as I remembered. Quaker was the sponsor in the mid-1950s of the popular television show, "Sergeant Preston of the Yukon." And who could forget his faithful companion, King, a dog not only smarter than Lassie but able to endure Arctic winters as well?

According to a reply from one Julia Conaghan of Quaker's consumer response group, "millions of deeds to square inches of land were distributed through this promotion." The deed itself says a total of 19.11 acres of land were owned by Klondike Big Inch Land Co. in the Yukon Territory. Some of you mathematicians can figure out exactly how many square inches that is. My quick calculations say there are 119,870,150.4 square inches in 19.11 acres. (Check me on this. My math is worse than my memory.)

Miss Conaghan -- who, by the way, was a senior specialist in 1988 -- says truthfully that the "real value of these deeds now, as always, is based on the romantic appeal of being a property owner in the fabled Yukon Territory."

She sent Ruff a store coupon for a free box of Quaker Oats along with her reply. He never used it, although he was still a fan of Quaker Oat Flakes -- both regular and instant -- and Quaker Oat Squares and Quaker Toasted Wholegrain Cereal.

Thanks, Bob, for taking the time to share all of this. And -- please, don't let my wife see this -- thanks for being a keeper. Otherwise, we would be giving all the credit for this land deal to Kellogg's. That wouldn't be fair.

The thought crossed my mind that it might be fun to go find the Klondike Big Inch Land Co.'s 19.11 acres in the Yukon. But the deed information is pretty discouraging: "Your land lies in a rugged wilderness. There are no roads or even trails to your land."

In other words, don't try checking up on this deal. What did you expect from one square inch?

Source:

http://www2.semissourian.com/old_miss/semissourian.com/pages/columnists/joe/columns/js051697.html