

## Marguerite Carmack A Gold Digger

Marguerite was one of the richest women in the West. She spent nearly twenty of her final years residing in Placer County, almost in obscurity, in the gold mining area around Westville. She died in Auburn on January 30, 1942.

Her great wealth came from her second husband, George Washington Carmack, the man who recorded the first claim that kicked off the Klondike Gold Rush in the Yukon in 1896. Within a period of five years, more than \$30 million worth of gold was removed from the streams and ground. Some 100,000 people rushed to Yukon. The journey was so perilous that it is estimated that only 15,000 to 20,000 actually became prospectors, only about 4,000 struck gold and only a few hundred became rich. Marguerite was one of the ones that made her money “mining the miners.”

Marguerite would use many names over the course of her sixty-eight years. Born in 1874 in San Francisco, she was the third of four children of Jacob G. and Marie Saftig. Of her siblings, the oldest was Cecilia, followed by Ernest, then her younger brother, Jacob.

At age *fourteen* she became Mrs. Peter M. Laimee. Laimee was a thirty-year-old zinc and silver molder at a San Francisco foundry, their shaky marriage lasted less than two years. Marguerite went to Spokane where she filed for a divorce. She left there without ever knowing if the divorce had been finalized. Keeping the name Marguerite Laimee, she moved on to Idaho. Marguerite made her living as an “entertainer.”

She spent time in various silver mining camps near Coeur d’Alene, Idaho. Her sister, Cecilia, seven years her senior, may have been with Marguerite in Idaho or may have joined her there to plan the next location to try. The sisters decided to travel to South Africa.

In 1866, she met a man in South Africa by the name of Joseph Le Grande. He escorted her on to Australia, where multiple gold rushes had begun back in 1851. They spent time together in Melbourne and Sydney. Joe was very much in love with Marguerite, who took Joe’s last name and became Marguerite Le Grande, despite the fact they never married. It turned out to be a one-way love affair. Marguerite would say later, “Oh, Joe just liked to follow me around!” She denied ever having a legal connection to Le Grande.

While in Sydney the Le Grandes began hearing reports about the great gold discoveries in the Yukon territory. Marguerite dropped Joe like a lead boomerang! She changed her last name back to Laimee and caught a steamer for Dawson City.

Arriving in the Yukon in July 1898 with \$2,000 in cash, Marguerite opened a cigar store on the first floor of the Green Tree Hotel. Her money was the result of “mining the miners” on three continents. Living above the store were several young ladies who had many male visitors coming and going at all hours of the night and day. It was said to be “one of the most active whorehouses in town.” The Royal Canadian Mounted Policemen, who patrolled the area, gave Marguerite another new name: “Biddy McCarthy” after an Irish ballad about a showgirl/actress/entertainer.

Marguerite still had not found her millionaire gold miner, but that was to change very soon. She was invited by friends to attend a large dinner party. Unbeknownst to her, George W. Carmack was also an invitee.

Although George Carmack is credited with the discovery of gold, a plaque noting the historic sites in Canada gives the credit to George’s brother-in-law Keish, James (Skookum Jim) Mason. Skookum Jim was said to be on his way to find his sister Kate and her husband George when he discovered the first

gold nugget. It is supposed that the family decided to let George file the claim as the claim of an indigenous Tagish man might be challenged.

When the dinner hosts introduced George Carmack to Marguerite Laimee, it was obvious that the two guests were instantly and mutually fascinated with each other. Within four months, George left his common law wife Kate and their daughter Graphie and left with Marguerite for Olympia where they were married.

By the spring of 1901, George and Marguerite were settling in Seattle, hoping for a quieter life together. They purchased a very large twelve room house there and Marguerite helped George invest his fortune in real estate in Seattle. George continued to search for gold in the Cascade Mountains.

Placer County's gold fields caught George's attention in 1913. He gave up on the mine in Washington, and moved to the area near the tiny town of Westville, forty-five miles northeast of Auburn, California. There he leased and then purchased three parcels of land containing four gold mines from Leo and Aline Harris: the Pacific Blue Lead Mine, the Outbreak Mine, the Snowshoe Mine, and the E. Elliott Carmack Lode.

At the Placer County mine sites, Marguerite turned out to be quite the hard worker. She cooked daily for the hired crew, and she even donned men's britches and leather boots to help with the mining work. Marguerite also took annual trips back to Seattle to check on their businesses there.

Carmack rarely went with Marguerite, but one time he did. It was May 1922, and they both had business to attend to in Seattle. George also had a speaking engagement in Vancouver, B.C. on May 30, so they travelled on to Canada.

The morning after delivering his speech, George woke up in their hotel room feeling miserable. He was diagnosed as having pneumonia.

Four days later, June 5, George Washington Carmack passed away at age 61. It is reported that before going into the hospital, he had taken off his wedding ring and handed it to Marguerite, telling her, "Take care of this until I get back."

Marguerite sent a very brief telegram to George's sister, Rose. The complete, terse text was "George dead." Arrangements were made to have Carmack's remains shipped to Seattle.

Not too long after George Carmack died, a legal contest over his estate, valued at approximately \$750,000, was initiated by his daughter, Graphie Saftig. (Graphie had married Marguerite's brother Jacob) She claimed that she should inherit one half of the estate. After a long court battle, involving properties in both King County, Washington, and Placer County, California, Graphie was awarded about \$75,000. Marguerite was recognized as the prime beneficiary, based on the certificate of marriage. Graphie's mother, Kate, had no documentation to prove she was ever George's legal spouse. Kate received nothing.

In 1923, Marguerite went back to Placer County. Over the next eighteen years, she poured most of her fortune into her five gold mines in Secret Canyon and Canada Hill. While they produced some income, it was never enough to cover the ongoing expenses of operation and excavation.

One thing Marguerite really loved to do was display all of the memorabilia of her days with George in the Klondike. When the inaugural Auburn Gold Show was being organized in 1924, Marguerite Carmack was invited to create a display of her artifacts in a downtown store window. In her honor, the event committee also let her ride in the parade on board a four-horse stage coach. She was delighted.

Marguerite continued to hold out hope that a new Mother Lode would be discovered in one of her gold mines, as George had predicted. As the years wore on, she was forced to sell off her properties in Seattle, including the house in which she and her husband had spent their happiest, quietest days.

Auburn became the residence for Marguerite Carmack after she finally gave up prospecting in 1941. Unfortunately, she was having difficulties with hypertension that may have begun before her move to town. She went to see her physician, Dr. David M. Kindopp. He placed her in the Placer County Hospital, located on property that is now the Elm Avenue shopping center.

For three weeks, she did not respond to treatment. On January 30, 1942, Marguerite suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and died at age sixty-eight. It is estimated that her death notice appeared in 200 newspapers across the United States and Canada, including the *Auburn Journal* and the *Placer Herald*.

Marguerite's body was taken to Marysville for cremation. The remains were shipped to Seattle for burial next to her husband. Her estate had dwindled to about \$3,000.

The dictionary offers two definitions for "gold digger:" 1. A woman who seeks gifts and expensive pleasures from men. 2. One that digs for gold.

Marguerite Carmack was both.

Taken from a manuscript by Craig George 2019.

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