

Jim and Edna Brennan

By Jim Brennan III

The Brennan family first came to Alaska in 1870, when James Brennan, a Trinity College of Dublin graduate, Irish revolutionary, and political refugee, came to Washington Territory and then to Wrangell. He went up the Stikine and made a successful strike in the Cassiar gold field. Shortly after his return, his health and finances failed. He died just before his son, James Aloysius “Sam” Brennan was born, in 1873, in Cowlitz Prairie, Washington.



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James Aloysius “Sam” Brennan was called Jim, like his father.

In 1893, Jim came to the Ketchikan area and then Wrangell. He worked as a blacksmith at the forerunner to the A.J. Mine in Juneau in 1894. In 1897, Jim worked as a packer over the Chilkoot Trail, earning his grubstake before going on to the great Klondike strike.

When mining prospects worsened, Jim left Dawson, traveled down the Yukon River, and joined the gold stampedes at Nome and then Fairbanks.

Returning to Nome, he served as secretary of the miners’ union before finally leaving Nome in 1906, long after most of the miners had given up.

After spending several years in Juneau, Jim Brennan came to Petersburg in 1910, with his wife Edna and two small children, Leroy and Dick.

Jim opened a saloon, popularly known as the Bucket of Blood, near the site of Petersburg’s present day General Services Building. The saloon featured good liquor, gambling, and pool, except when such activities were prohibited.

During Alaska’s “Bone Dry” law, which preceded national Prohibition, Jim adapted. He converted the Bucket of Blood to the “Gilt Edge,” with soft drinks, pool, billiards, and cigars. However, Jim had to temporarily close his establishment in 1918, when he was the victim of a trumped-up charge of sedition brought by a corrupt federal prosecutor, as was later proven in legal proceedings.

The false charge arose out of a visit to Petersburg by the Deputy U.S. Attorney and a navy vessel, ostensibly to confiscate a Scow Bay moonshine still and shut down the town’s red light business.

When this prosecutor and the naval officers began swilling the evidence and pressuring the ladies for their favors, prior to running them out of town, Jim would not tolerate the hypocrisy and burst through the door with a U.S. Marshal in tow as a witness.

Unfortunately, this earned Jim a completely fabricated charge of pro-Germanic sedition — a very serious criminal allegation in World War I Alaska — from a vindictive prosecutor wielding largely unchecked power.

Jim had to put up everything he owned to make bond, hire a lawyer, and locate the witnesses the prosecutor had run out of Petersburg.

Once the true facts came to light, the charges were dismissed, amidst detailed Juneau newspaper stories regarding the “interesting” developments in the case.

Jim resumed operation of the saloon until it was destroyed by fire in 1951. The bar was well known up and down the coast, partly because of the camaraderie

Jim and Edna Brennan cont'd

of the gold stampede days.

Jim was a strong and bighearted man, who led Norwegians, Natives and other converted Irishmen in annual St. Patrick's Day parades and celebrations, where he usually won the Fat Man's Race.

He made many uncovered loans to those who were down on their luck. He was a founding member of the Arctic Brotherhood and of the Moose Lodge in Petersburg. He served on the city council and on the city committee that first brought electricity to town. He was also active in territorial politics.

Jim Brennan died in 1952.

Edna Brennan was an accomplished writer who wrote a history and description of Petersburg for the first issue of the *Petersburg Progressive*, in 1913. She was also active in the town's first theatrical productions.

Edna suffered ongoing health problems, which required her to live in Port Townsend, Washington, while raising her young boys.

Despite her chronic illness, she lived until 1951.



Jim Brennan in a "Fat Man's Race," an annual St. Patrick's Day event, which Brennan usually won.