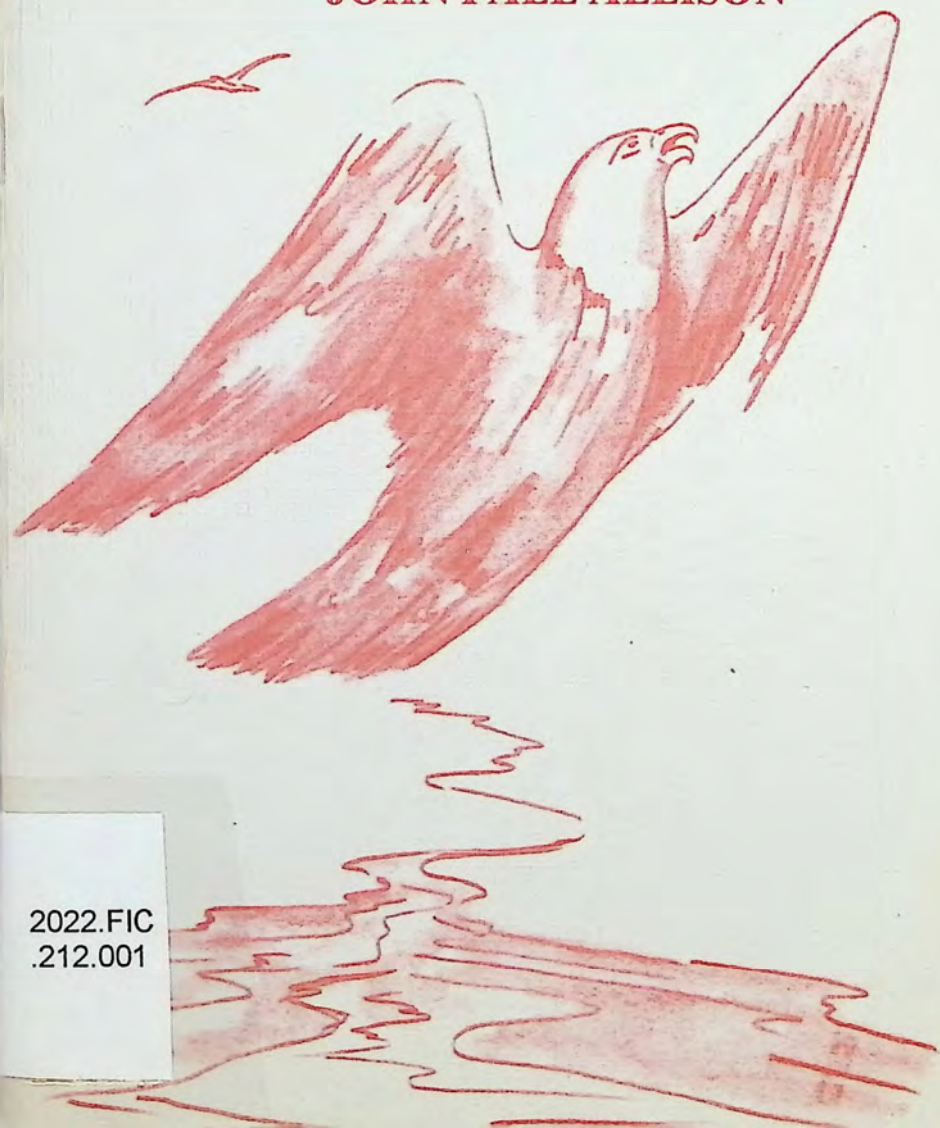


LETTERS AND REFLECTIONS  
FROM THE LIFE AND TIMES  
OF  
JOHN FALL ALLISON



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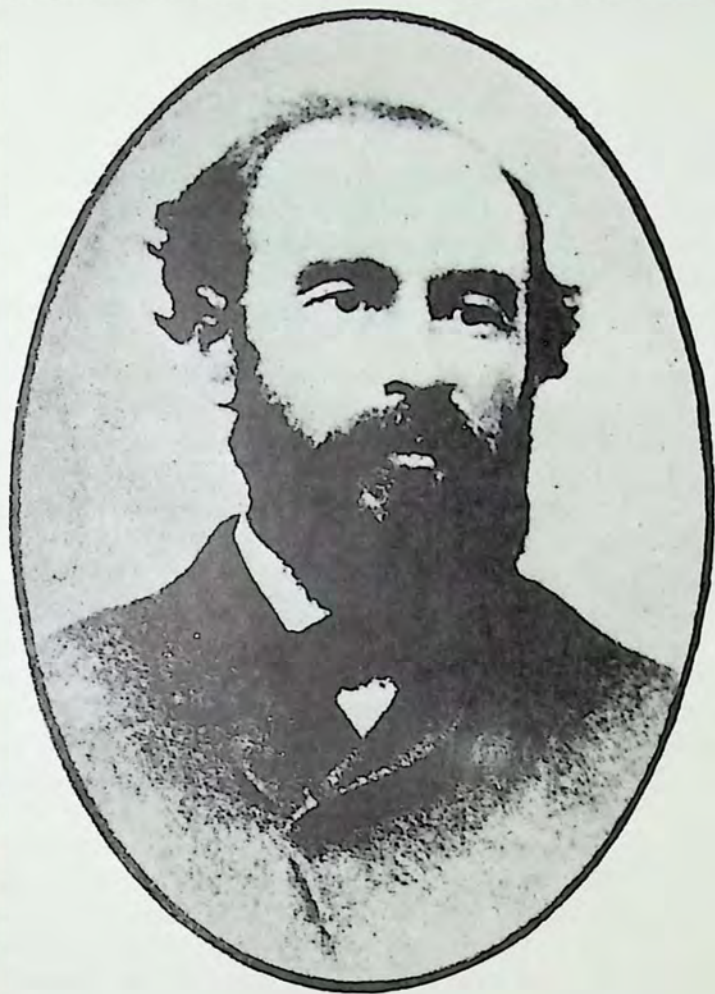
Looking backward through the years,  
Down the trails of yesterday,  
Must we let those paths grow dim,  
Their memories fade away?  
Forgotten in the mist of time  
Where many footsteps fell,  
The echoes of those far off days  
All have a tale to tell,  
So let us now, while yet there's time  
Let memories backward flow,  
To honour those who blazed the trails  
So long, long ago.

Written by Aurelia Angela Allison-McDiarmid  
Second Youngest Child of the Late  
John Fall Allison

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The First White Settler in the Similkameen  
John Fall Allison  
Born in Leeds, Yorkshire, England 1825

## *A Bit of Early History*

The first of the Allison's to enter Britain, their name at that time being Allistair, came with the Norman invasion from the Continent. The Anglicized version became Allison. Their crest was a falcon rising, and their motto "Truth Conquers". A later generation of the same family that emigrated to Scotland became Alister. Many generations had passed when the English descendants immigrated to the United States of America.

My grandfather, Robert Allison, was born September 30, 1796, at Crosby, Grange, near Thursk which is not far from Leeds. He had one brother who died a bachelor in England, and three sisters who married and came to America, prior to Robert's emigration. He was educated in Leeds and became the house surgeon in the Leeds infirmary. Robert married Sarah Briggs, a young social worker in Leeds. They had four children who were born there; John, the eldest, William, Elizabeth and Carolyn. Times were not prosperous and on hearing of the opportunities in America, in 1837 Robert decided to immigrate with his family. They settled in the small village of Oriskany in New York state, among other English immigrants. A third son, George, was born in 1842 at Oriskany.

Robert Allison practised medicine at Oriskany, being the only one there at that time who knew about drugs and their uses. Unfortunately, Robert's health failed and he was obliged to give up his practice.

Robert's eldest son John, being twelve years of age at the time of the family emigration, finished his schooling in America and entered medical college at Turner Junction, Illinois. While yet an intern, great and exciting news spread throughout the country. Gold had been discovered in California!

Doctors, lawyers, merchants, men from all walks of life, left their all to dig for gold.

John was among the first to leave, sponsored by a Mr Kent, who put him in charge of a small company of young men. As he was a delicate, slender looking youth, many people were of the opinion that he would never live to reach the gold fields of California, which in those days was considered to be a great and hazardous undertaking.

## *The Letters*

The following excerpts, taken from his correspondence with loved ones left behind in New York state, give a factual and exciting glimpse into those far off days, and present a true picture of the man, John Fall Allison, himself, as he really was.

His first letter home was from New York City whence they embarked for California.

Lovejoys Hotel  
January 25 1849

Dear Parents

It was with great pleasure that I received your letter in answer to mine of the 18th. I am very glad to hear that you are well and that Mother feels more reconciled. We have been very busy in purchasing our outfit since my last, that I have not had an opportunity of communicating with my friends. It was not that I forgot them but for want of time and opportunity.

I was very much pleased with brother William's letter. He must continue writing as often as possible.

Tell sister Elizabeth not to despair for I shall soon be home with my pockets full of rocks. Father must not send her to the factory again if he can possibly do without, for I abhor the factory as much as I do the abominations of New York (City). James Ezard was very much pleased with the encouragement he received from home. I will write John Bowes tonight.

We shall sail tomorrow morning if the weather is favourable, in the Bark Marrietta for Chagres. We have concluded to cross the Isthmus, as I think it is the safest and shortest route that can be taken at the present. We pay forty dollars for our passage from New York to

Chagres—we are found provisions. From thence we take a small steamer up the river and from there by mules to Panama. I have purchased what medicines we want. I think we shall not need any preventions for scurvy as our sea voyage will be but twenty days at the farthest each time. We have got a good supply of provisions. I think they will last eight months with economy. We are well armed, each man has a carbine, one brace of pistols and a knife. Mr Kent has a plate with the Oriskany Mining Co. armed and equipped which you can view.

We are all in good health and good spirits as we have very encouraging advice from the gold diggings, and plenty of money to carry us there and back, which Mr Kent left with us. (Dollars in gold besides paying our passage to Chagres and all our expenses here). This is perfectly private, therefore tell it to no man. We have got a gold washer, picks, shovels, crow bars, pump, hose, etc., with which we hope to make a million dollars in two years.

We have plenty of gold to bring us back if we make nothing. But I must bid you all goodbye and believe me, I love you all. I might write more but I know not what to write first, so goodbye.

Your affectionate son,  
J.F. Allison

His first letter home from the California gold fields was typical of many letters sent home by other young adventurers of that period.

Sacramento City  
September 16 1849

Dearest Parents:

Since my letter of the 10th July I have been on the



march. On the 11th we left Sacramento City for Horseshoe Bar on the North Fork of the American River. We travelled on foot having put our goods in an ox wagon for which we paid sixteen dollars per pound (the owner of the team engaged me to weigh the goods and collect pay for which he allowed me fifty dollars on our freight). We crossed the American River by a ferry boat. They charged us twelve dollars for the team and one dollar p. each person. We travelled two days and slept two nights under the shade of an oak tree, but were annoyed by the barking and howling of the prairie wolves. The country in the Valley of the Sacramento is generally a succession of plains with occasionally a grove of oak trees resembling an apple orchard. We reached Horseshoe Bar in good health and good spirits. You can imagine the pleasure with which we reached our friends after having been parted near four months. They were much improved in appearance. Ezard wears a long beard with a heavy moustache, he is quite a formidable looking man. They were very comfortably situated in a village of tents and a community of respectable citizens. We worked there about six weeks and made from half an ounce to an ounce and a half per day each man; mining is the hardest work I ever did. Imagine yourself in the bed of the Oriskany Creek, digging up the cobble stones for six feet deep, cemented together for ages by gravel, clay and sand, and then carrying the dirt fifteen or twenty yards in pails, throwing it into a washer, and then rocking with one hand, while you pour water with the other and working from ten to twelve hours a day, sometimes with wet feet and wet pants, and you may have some idea of gold digging. We have professors, lawyers and doctors digging in partnership with sailors, cobblers etc., all on equal terms. This is the country for equality! You see the sailor and poor

HORSESHOE BAR  
AMERICAN RIVER  
1849



mechanic shaking his big bag of dust at the merchant. The North Fork became very much crowded, every bar on the river became full of diggers, our share of the bar we dug over as deep as the river would allow, and we were therefore obliged to do a prospecting and seeking for good diggings. Cheesebro, myself and Shaw packed our blankets on our backs and started for the dry diggings about ten miles from our camp. We worked there one day and got some pieces but the spring of water dried up and we were obliged to leave. We prospected about two days and then returned to our old camp. We found that Fowler had gone to Sacramento; we received a letter from him saying that he had taken a contract to deliver thirty tons of hay at the city for sixty dollars per ton, he advised us to come down, he thought we could do better in town. I returned to the city and bought goods and established a store on the north bank of the American River at the ford, and on the side of the prairie were a number of the overland emigrants encamped, to recount their cattle before bringing them into the city for sale. I could clear about an ounce and a half a day. I kept the place about two weeks and then resigned it to Shaw. He has been on the sick list for five weeks. He has been in hospital at Sutters Fork a few days for which we had to pay twenty-five dollars per day; but he is now able to work a little. His disease was dysentery. We think it best for each one to work for himself, therefore Ezard and myself are joining a company to the head of the Sacramento and from thence to the Trinity; it is probably a little over two hundred miles from here. We have bought two horses and one mule, the mule we intend to pack with provisions we shall put on him two hundred pounds. He is a fine large and noble animal, I gave one hundred and fifty dollars for him. The horses we gave one hundred

dollars for one and sixty dollars for the other. I bought my horse off an Indian. He is as wild but still as gentle as his old master, he is a pure white pony with the initials of my sister's name branded on him—E.A. He is as fleet as the wind. I feel very proud of him. We start tomorrow morning. I think I shall start a store and employ the Indians in freighting. It is a new mining district and not so crowded. I think we shall do better. I met with Geo. Spurr while I was in the North Fork. We did not recognize each other for some time though I was asked who that young man was. We are very much changed in appearance. He re-examined my countenance some time before he knew me. He told me he left his father in Sacramento *drunk*. Marcus Yarwood he left in San Francisco. I have not heard from him yet. As I returned from the North Fork some two or three weeks since I heard that Geo. Spurr's father *was dead*. They said he died at Sutters Fort in the hospital. I will ride down to the Fort and enquire.

I resume my letter. I have just returned from the Fort and I learn that Mr Spurr died at the hospital about the 9th of August. The physician who attended him was not there and I could not learn any particulars. I examined their books and found an entry against Mr Spurr for son Geo. for three days attendance, so much for coffin and for digging grave sixteen dollars—the bill footed up eighteen dollars, it was not settled. There has been considerable sickness, the prevailing disease is dysentery and fever and ague. I have not had a day's sickness since I landed in the country though I have had a little touch of dysentery but was always able to attend to my business. Sacramento City is improving rapidly. It appears to grow like magic. There were but two or three stores when I first came here but now there are two or three hundred, the majority are built of canvas,

a number of good substantial buildings are in erection, one building I see they are covering with sheet iron. City lots that sold for five hundred when we arrived are now selling for three thousand; but next Spring is going to ruin Sacramento. I am informed that the whole city will be under water from the effects of the heavy rains. Labour is still very high, mechanics wages are good and the time for mining is at hand. You would be surprised to see the immense number of people going and coming to and from the mines, but the great rush is to dig gold. They are making from one to six ounces per day. I have caught the mania afresh and tomorrow morning I start as it were a second time. I have gained considerable experience in the general trade of the country and also of mining and think I can now work to advantage. As a company we exist no more, every man has to work upon his own energy.

One gets an exciting insight into the marvelous energy and enthusiasm of the young John Allison at this time as, for the first time since coming to California, he is free and unhampered by his sense of duty to his comrades of the original Oriskany Co. He turns with determination to the affairs of shaping his own destiny.

The period between 1849 and 1851 was filled with enthusiastic and vivid accounts of his adventures, and descriptions of life in the gold fields.

Sacramento City  
January 1851

The great excitement that was got up here about "gold bluffs" is all a humbug. It was got up by a few rascals for the purpose of making money by carrying passengers.

Sacramento City  
February 28, 1851

Our city was thrown into great excitement the other day by a murder that took place near the place I reside. I saw the foul deed done, so I was present during the trial and execution. My heart ached for the poor wretch, but it was necessary to make an example for the gamblers are continually shooting at someone or another so that it is dangerous to pass along the street.

Sacramento City  
May 14th, 1851.

You will see by the papers the destruction of San Francisco by fire. Our city is threatened with the same calamity, but thus far by vigilant exertion of our police, it has been preserved. My health is good and I hope to return home by next Spring, not that I dislike California, but all that I love and care for, or have any ambition to strive for, is centred in that little word HOME.

Sacramento City  
June 12th, 1851.

I have taken a large warehouse in company with Kent and Lister and at present am selling the cargo of the Bark Ann Welsh. If you ever write by express direct it to "Bark John", Charter, Foot of Pass. I am independent of all men in this country, for if a man goes broke all he has is to go to the mines, which is the only poor house we have here. George Spurr, I informed you, was wounded by a bear. His wound broke loose so many times and reduced him so low that I was afraid he would die. I took him to the State Hospital and he is now doing very well.



SACRAMENTO 1851

July 14th, 1851.

I am very busy at present and George Spurr wants me to go to the hospital and see him operated upon. They will probably take his arm off, there is but little chance of saving his life. I think in my next letter I shall have the painful duty of announcing his death. I am going to start a new business in the boating line, the river is so very low the steamboats cannot run to Marysville. I intend to run two or three whale boats in connection with my present business (store). I have a large quantity of goods on hand. I think I can make a little by freighting some of them to Marysville. I've got a man and his wife living on board with me. He is working for me and she cooks and does our washing. She is a Kanaka woman. I am going to the mines in a few days to look for a quartz vein in company with Kent and Mr Lister. The money I receive from the sale of "The Bark John" I have invested in the Marysville trade which as quick as the water rises will be good for nothing.

The year 1852 saw more law and order on the American and Sacramento Rivers and also immigrants from many lands, drawn by the lure of gold, poured in to compete for riches.

Sacramento City  
April 15th, 1852.

There is still an immense emigration to this country. There were about four hundred Celestials landed on our levee this morning! I think if there are many more of the long tailed creatures landed here, there will be a muss. They are a curse to the country. They bring nothing in and carry everything out, for as soon as they make a little money they vamoose, spending as little as possible during their stay, living on rice and if they could get that for nothing, they would want you to give them a picayune with it.



Sacramento City  
August 26th, 1852.

I was not so successful in my mining operation as I anticipated, but I think it may pay well yet. I met brother William in the mines some ninety miles from Sacramento! You can imagine with what pleasure I received him. The first day William and Joel worked they made four dollars each.

The year 1852 saw John making the rounds of the gold camps which were opening up in the northern part of California, in company with other adventurous young men. Temporarily at odds with the rough prospecting life, he turned to freighting goods in the muddy, flooded area of Sacramento and seems to have done very well, even finding a position for brother William. (It is of interest to note that the present day Sacramento is sixteen feet higher than in 1852, having been built up to keep the buildings above flood level.)

Sacramento City  
December 31, 1852.

Since my last letter I have been north on a prospecting tour, but found nothing there to induce me to spend the winter. From Sacramento I went to Shasta City, Trinity River, Scott River and finally to Yreka. It has cost me two months of time, a tramp of about a thousand miles, besides my expenses out. I think I shall give up mining for the present. This last trip has sickened me of prospecting.

You will have heard the particulars of the fire. I suppose since that event the city has been partly overflowed and now is a perfect mudhole. The streets are impassable for wagons and are now navigated by mud scows. All the goods are taken from the levee to the store in small boats something similar to stone boats, drawn by from one to four horses, mules or oxen. Our streets

are a scene of continual excitement, cattle of all description moving down every few rods, and a number of pedestrians thinking themselves on terra firma are suddenly submerged beneath the mud! I have the last two or three weeks been engaged in boating goods to the upper part of the city for some Chinese merchants.

There is no business done in this town, as it is impossible to get goods out of the city. We are all therefore willing to make money any way we can. Brother William has been assisting me. The river is now rising very fast and I think by tomorrow it will be all over the city. If so I think I can do very well carrying freight and passengers around the city. I shall remain in this town doing what I can this winter and shall try to get into some permanent business next Spring. George Spurr is keeping a small restaurant in this city.

Sacramento City

February 15, 1853.

I think that the rainy season is pretty much over. Business is improving in the city and I think in a week or two it will be in a successful tide of operation.

At about this time, news of gold and precious stones in vast quantity came out of Australia. George Spurr, in spite of the loss of an arm to a grizzly in their early years in the gold fields, seems to have urged John to hit the road again with him for greener pastures. After some consideration John seems to have dropped the idea and went on with his freighting and mining.

Sacramento City

May 31, 1853.

We have in our employment three Chinamen which we pay three dollars per day. If our luck holds out I

think you may look for us home in the Spring. Disregard what Spurr writes in his letters. Australia is out of the question. My idea was this Spring that there was such an immense emigration there that I could with a small capital and my experience make something out of it, but give yourselves no uneasiness about it, I shall not go! We are well and happy and comfortable in our log cabin as can be. In my next letter I shall have to write you some fireside scenes.

In July 1854, having recouped his fortunes somewhat from his store and freighting business, John and his brother William returned to Oriskany for a visit, the first glimpse of home for John in five years. There, caught up in family affairs, he did not journey West again until March, 1855.

On returning he took John West, husband to his sister Elizabeth, with him, guaranteeing his safe return.

New York  
March 5, 1855.

We are prepared for sailing and shall leave New York in two or three hours. Tell sister Elizabeth not to despair and to trust to Providence. I shall look out for John West and he *will* return next year!

California  
July 26, 1855.

We are now working on Poor Mans Creek, a few yards from our old cabin. This claim has the appearance of paying well. We have worked one week on it but have not taken out anything as yet, but I think we shall get something this week. We have three claims, two on the creek and one on the river. At present we are only working on the creek. Our expenses have been considerable, what with having to procure tools and other

implements necessary for mining. Tell William he must stay in that country. Tell sister Liz, John West will be on his way home sometime June of 1856, with I hope improved pecuniary affairs!

Poor Mans Creek  
June 15, 1856.

I expect John has given you all the information about me etc. I am well and got my hands full attending to my claims. You must always excuse my short letters, for I really have nothing to write about; my attention is altogether occupied by mining. I employ three men at fifty dollars a month, each with board.

Poor Mans Creek  
1857.

I am getting along on my claims as well as I expected, but do not make the mistake of thinking me a rich man. I have too many irons in the fire to know whether I am worth anything or not. I will strive to return home if possible but I have made a mark and must come up to that! I still keep my stowship in Sacramento, and shall continue to do so until at least next spring.

The year 1858 brought news to the California fields of a new Eldorado. North, in the British Territories on a river called Fraser, there was great wealth to be got for the picking and once again the rush was on. Again, thousands of men dropped everything, including many from the now slow California diggings and headed north for a place called Fort Victoria. Touched anew by the gold fever, John speculated on a trip to see for himself.

Poor Mans Creek  
June 15, 1858.

The people in this state are in a terrible excitement

about the new gold mines discovered on the Fraser River. The people are leaving in the thousands, which causes labour to be scarce and high. It is going to depopulate some parts of California. Many claims are depreciating in value, the worry is always with us. I think I may visit the new mines this summer—it is but a few days sail from San Francisco. You must not be uneasy about my making any rash moves to the new mines. I am an old experienced miner and shall duly consider before making a move.

In 1858, John Allison sailed north for Fort Victoria to investigate the possibilities of the new mines. Armed with letters to Governor Douglas and his characteristic energy and enthusiasm, he was able to "make do" while investigating possibilities.

Victoria, Crown Colony  
Vancouver Island  
August 12, 1858.

Dear Parents:

I arrived at this place a few days since after a long passage of seventeen days. We had a very pleasant voyage. I formed a very pleasant and intimate acquaintance with the Captain of the ship. I have been staying a few days with him on board his ship since my arrival in port. He offered me a passage on board this ship to New York if I would accompany him by way of China. I have not been long enough in this country to form an opinion of its richness in gold and as all things here are dependent on the mines I shall defer giving my opinion until I have visited them. From reports and the opinion of the residents here I think the country is rich in gold, but it will require some time to develop its richness. I shall remain in this city two or three weeks and shall then probably visit the mines. I have not time to write

much at present as a steamer has unexpectedly come into port and will leave in a few hours. I have therefore written these few lines to let you know of my safe arrival. I will write you a letter in a few days giving you all particulars. My love to all at home.

Your affectionate son,  
J.F. Allison

Victoria  
September 1, 1858.

I am at present residing in Victoria and occasionally get a little business to do, writing, posting books, etc., about enough money to pay my expenses. News from the mining district is rather encouraging and I think this summer will determine the value of Fraser River's mines.

Victoria, Vancouver Island  
Crown Colony  
November 1858.

My Dear Parents:

I have not received any letters from you since I left San Francisco but expect them by next mail from California. I am still residing at Victoria but expect to visit Fort Hope and Yale in a few days. I do not know at present if I shall remain up the river this winter but expect to spend the winter in this country. I feel convinced that it is a good mining country but that there will not be much mining done until next Spring. I am sorry to disappoint you in not coming home this Winter. I feel as though I should lose a good chance of making money by returning at present. I have spent the best portion of my life in chasing after gold which has unfitted me for any other occupation, and to throw away the present chance appears to me like sacrificing all my past years of

toil and giving up the prospect of independence in the future. You can probably imagine how much I suffer by giving up the pleasure of home and society, but they are nothing compared with the regret I feel at causing sorrow and anxiety to my dear parents, but I trust in Providence and look forward to the future. Circumstances over which I have no control appear to have driven me to my present situation and I console myself with the idea that all things are ordered for the best. I hope you are enjoying good health. You are aware that I will do all that lays in my power to make you comfortable. I hope I shall not have to make a long stay in this country. It may be that I shall get satisfied this Winter, but at present I cannot say how long my stay may be. I have spent my time agreeably in this city—having a church to go to and some society makes it feel more like home. I have been studying the Chinook jargon and can now converse with the Indians. It may be some use to me if I go up the country. Anyone enquiring about this country with a view of coming here I would advise them to wait until next Summer as something definite will then be known of its resources and nothing will be lost by waiting for it will require years before the country will be thoroughly prospected.

I expect to have lively times next Spring as there will be a number of new towns to build and good chances for speculation in real estate. I think yet I shall make a good strike but all depends upon the richness of the mines. I hope West and William are getting along alright and that business is lively with them. I will try and keep up a regular correspondence with them as soon as I get located again. I have just received two letters from you dated July 1 and August 3rd. I am very glad to hear that you are in good health and that you did not take it to heart about my going to Fraser River. I was very glad to

hear that you take it cheerful. I got a letter inside mine for Sidney Bowes—I will send it back today. Tell brother William to stick to his situation until I tell him to leave it. If I see any possible chance for him to do better he may rest satisfied that I will let him know. My kind love to him and assure him that my prosperity shall be his. My love to dear Mother. I am very thankful for her letters. My love to dear Sisters. I hope Elizabeth has got over her confinement and is enjoying good health. I expect I shall have to make the acquaintance of numerous nephews and nieces when I return. I will write to Sidney Bowes today. May God bless you all is the prayer of your

Affectionate son,  
J. F. Allison.

My kind respects to my relatives and friends.

Early in 1859, John travelled to Fort Hope with great expectations, having become convinced that the new Fraser River diggings were worth the effort. Locating three miles up the Fraser Canyon from Fort Hope, he commenced placer mining at a spot known as Trafalgar Flat.

Fort Hope  
June 26, 1859.

My Dear Parents:

I received your letter dated May 3rd. I am at present located about three miles above Fort Hope on the Fraser River. I am bringing in a ditch to work a large flat which I think will pay from six to eight dollars a day. I shall have the ditch completed in about two weeks and shall then commence mining. I hope to do tolerably well mining and selling water. We have to pay the Government five dollars per month for the ditch right if we use the water ourselves, and if we sell water we have to allow



the Government the net proceeds of one day in every month. I like our location very well, we are so near a cheap market. We have got a small Indian canoe and can run down to Hope in half an hour. Steamboats are running regular to Fort Hope, which puts us in communication with the world at large, so that in the future I shall be able to write and receive letters by every mail. I am very glad to hear so good an account of brother George. I hope he will write to me occasionally. I have not much time for writing at present as we are employed from daylight to dark on our ditch and Sundays I have to go to Hope which generally occupies the day, but after I get the ditch completed I shall have more time and will write longer letters. My love to Mother and George and believe me to be ever

Your aff. son,  
J.F. Allison

Direct to me at Fort Hope,  
British Columbia.

And also acquaint my friends with my address.

September 1, 1859.

My Dear Mother:

I received your welcome letter dated July 13th. I was glad to hear that I had got some friends left at Oriskany to enquire about me. Give my kind regards to Miss J. Cunningham, Miss Noys and Mrs. Gossins' family. It really gives me pleasure to know that they yet take an interest in my welfare. And now, dear Mother, I must protest against the idea you entertain of my sufferings and the hardships I have to endure. I assure you they are nothing to me. If I knew you were comfortable and in good circumstances I should laugh at the caprices of Dame Fortune. As to hard work I do not do much of it. I am generally what you call Boss in any company I am

connected with and do the light work. I have got a comfortable cabin and all the provisions I desire—the only thing I lack is the society of my relatives and the social intercourse with youth my equals, but for my parents' sake I shall return home as soon as I can with a prospect of staying there. May our Heavenly Father grant your desires is the prayer of

Your Most Aff. Son  
J.F. Allison

Trafalgar Flats  
September 30, 1859.

My Dear Parents:

I have not received any letters from you for two or three weeks past but expect one by every mail. I have got fairly to work again. We have got plenty of water and shall not want in that respect again this year. I am doing tolerably well and as soon as I can get my little affairs straightened up here I will send you some money. My health continues good. Our rainy season has set in and the mountain tops around us are capped with snow which reminds us of winter. We went a-fishing the other day and caught about one hundred and twenty-five salmon—sufficient to last through the winter. We pickled them, they made about two barrels and a half.

I have nothing particular to write about this mail, but I thought a few lines would relieve any anxiety you might feel about me. You must not be surprised if my letters are irregular, for we have not regular mail from Victoria.

May our Heavenly Father grant your prayers is the dearest wish of,

Your aff. son,  
J.F. Allison

Fort Hope

October 23, 1859.

My claims are paying tolerably well—from four to six dollars a day. I have not sold any water yet. Not many new mines are coming on the river; there is no demand for the article at present. I really have no time for writing. I am occupied until night on my claims; my business is an easy one, but with few leisure hours.

Trafalgar Flats

November 10, 1859.

We are this week having our first touch of winter. Monday set in with a snowstorm and cleared off with a strong frost which has stopped our mining operations. I expect two or three days of frost and then moderate weather again. I hope we shall not have to be idle more than a few days at a time during the winter.

Trafalgar Flats

January 29, 1860.

On Sundays I generally go to Fort Hope, get my letters and a newspaper, these occupy my day. We have commenced operations again on our claims. For a month or so we shall not be able to work regular as we cannot save the gold when it freezes.

Although the main rush seemed to be north up through the Fraser Canyon, word came through of other areas in the mountains south and east of the Canyon, the area called Similkameen. The Brigade Trail entered this area by very difficult routes over high and rough country, but Allison decided an easier and more efficient route could be found. After exploring the mountains east of Hope, he discovered a route through at the 4,200 ft. level, which bears his name this day. Allison Pass.

Trafalgar Bar  
May 18, 1860.

I have just returned from an unsuccessful attempt to get to the Similkameen mines. I found too much snow on the mountains and was obliged to return. I shall probably try again in the course of a week or so. I hope soon to find something that will pay me better than my present diggings. Do not imagine that I run about after reports raised by interested parties. I depend on my own judgement and my own prospecting to find diggings. In my last attempt I was accompanied by the High Sheriff of British Columbia and a party of Indians. The Sheriff was sent out by the Governor.

Fort Hope  
July 8th, 1860.

I have been a resident of Fort Hope for the past two, or is it three weeks, waiting for the Hudson Bay train to come in and open the trail so that I could start tomorrow. I am going at the head of a party of men to prospect the country, the Government paying the expenses. A company of miners came into Fort Hope from that country yesterday for provisions. They report very favourably. I cannot say if I will return to Fort Hope before fall.

Fort Hope  
August 4, 1860.

My Dear Parents:

I received your letters dated June 2nd and 18th. I am glad to hear that you received the draft I sent. I have just returned from the Similkameen country. I have succeeded in finding diggings that I think will pay me ten dollars a day. A great many men are rushing in there and it is my impression that it will prove a tolerable

good mining country. Your letters met me about half way betwixt Fort Hope and my camp on the Similkameen. They were brought over by the first express to the new diggings. I wish you could have seen me at the time I received them. I was mounted on an Indian horse with a small hair rope tied to his under jaw for a bridle, and an Indian-made saddle and my clothing was half Indian. In fact, you would scarcely know if I was a white man or a savage. I had washed the paint off my face but it was still a little tinged. The Indians in the Similkameen are very friendly, they are much better off than on Fraser. They have plenty of horses and all are good riders. I have come in to Hope for a supply of provisions. I have horses with me to pack them out. I am very busy preparing to return. I am anxious to get off today and I have very little time to write. I have my report to make to government and considerable other business to tend to so I cannot give you a detailed account of my wanderings.

I am sorry that I have not time to answer Carrie's letter, but I hope soon to be settled again and then I will try to repay them all. I shall have your letters regularly forwarded to me and I will try to write one a month at least. My love to sisters and brothers and kind regard to you all friends, and believe me to be ever,

Your aff. son,  
J.F. Allison

At this point, John Fall Allison began his pioneering of the Similkameen. Medical student, miner, adventurer, rancher, he left his mark indelibly on the land of his choice. His final years there are best expressed in the letters penned to his family in New York state, giving news of his long and ever active life.

Similkameen River  
September 2nd, 1860.

My Dear Parents:

I have not received any letters from you since I left Fort Hope but expect one by the next express that comes this way. I am at present located on the south fork of the Similkameen or as some call it, Allison's Fork, about seventy-five miles from Hope. I am making from eight to ten dollars a day. How long it will last I cannot say. I think the diggings in this locality are much better than on Fraser. There have been hundreds of men rushed in since we struck the diggings and hastily left declaring them a humbug. Such is always the case in gold mining, but I have considerable confidence in this locality, not because I discovered it, but the indications are better and it has more of a California look than any other part of British Columbia I have seen. If my claims continue to yield as well as at present I shall be able to send you some funds this fall. I have been under considerable expense, independent of what the Government agreed to pay for, and am some little in debt, but I expect when I get a settlement with the Government they will allow all my expenses if not more. Some of the miners around me are doing very well. I know of one making as high as twenty dollars a day, but I never advise anyone to come to the mines—the business is too uncertain. The reports I have made have been considerably magnified—it is impossible for a gold story to lose anything by repeating. Like the snowball, it accumulates at every turn. I suppose there has been considerable said in our newspapers about my discoveries, but I have not had an opportunity of seeing them with the exception of one I got hold of yesterday from which I clip a portion and enclose in this letter. If I should attempt to send a paper from here I know you would not get it. I have had so

much to write and say about this country that it is really disagreeable to me to repeat it. I shall therefore omit giving you a description of it but will try to make arrangements to send you newspapers with full accounts. My kindest love Mother, to sisters and brothers. How oft do I think of you. If I ever feel like shedding tears it is when I think of the loved ones at home. *God bless you all.* I wonder what the men around me would think if they saw the rough pioneer almost in tears. I know you often think of me and know me for what I am and not for what I appear to be. Here I am a rough pioneer and I suppose they think me hard-hearted and selfish, and it is a great consolation for me to know that a few in the world think of me with fond and loving hearts.

I cannot write more at present. May our Heavenly Father comfort you all is the prayer of

Your Aff. Son

J.F. Allison

John West and friends. I do not forget them.

Similkameen

October 6th, 1860.

My Dear Parents:

I did not receive a letter from you by last mail. Since my last I have been very busy. His Excellency, the Governor, made a tour through this part of the country during last month. I waited upon him and during our conversation I mentioned a new route to Fort Hope which I thought would be a considerable cut off and make a better road. After consulting with the Indians, he authorized me to employ a number of men, take charge of the job and put it through immediately. Before starting on the work the Governor told me that he was going to appoint me Gold Commissioner and

Magistrate for the Similkameen district. I cleared a trail 36 miles long in ten days, the Governor came over it as soon as completed and thanked me warmly for my energy and perseverance in getting through with it. During my absence on the trail a petition or remonstrance was got up by my enemies against my being appointed Magistrate, etc., and represented as the wish of the people. I therefore lost the offer. The Governor told me that he thought it arose from jealousy as they could not say anything against my character. He told me repeatedly that I should not be forgotten so I suppose I may expect a good Government situation if I wish to take it. I was tolerably well paid for superintending the trail. I have taken up a very good farm of 160 acres which I shall make something out of. My claims are paying tolerably well. I am in great haste so you must excuse this.

Your affectionate son,  
J.F. Allison

South Fork, Similkameen  
November 12th, 1860.

My Dear Parents:

I received your letter of September 3rd. I have located on the south fork of the Similkameen for the winter and shall employ myself at mining during that period. In the spring I shall remove to my farm and put in all the crop I can. I think we shall have considerable emigration here in the spring and that we shall have a good market for vegetables; potatoes will be my principal crop. I shall have some difficulty in getting seed, but I expect to manage that through the Indians. They have some potatoes, and as they say I am their friend I hope they will show their gratitude by letting me have some of



their potatoes. I think I have got the most desirable location for a farm in this part of the country; it is in the forks made by the junction of the north and the south forks of this river. Part of the soil is a deep black, the balance is a light sandy soil, but all fit for cultivation. There are thousands of acres of rolling hills around it that are the finest kinds of grazing land. If I only had such a farm as this in any civilized country with my friends around me I should not wish for anything better. As it is I shall merely hold it until I can sell it at a decent price. I took it up for speculation—the price for Crown lands in British Columbia is reduced to \$1.25 per acre by order of the Home Government. I have got a good supply of provisions for the winter as I expect our communications with Hope may be cut off for four or five months. It may be that we shall have an express messenger sent through two or three times during the winter, but packing provisions is out of the question. I intend to take a trip through myself about mid-winter on snowshoes if we have a favourable spell of weather, but you must not be at all surprised if you do not hear from me for some months as I do not suppose anyone will be rash enough to cross the mountains if we have a severe winter. I am very sorry that I cannot send you any money and it is impossible to say when I can do so. If the winter is not too severe for mining I think I shall do tolerably well and may be able to send you some money by spring, but it is impossible to say what the winter will be as no white man has wintered here before. There will be between seventy-five and a hundred stay here this winter. We have had a few sharp frosts and a slight sprinkling of snow here already, but I do not anticipate a severe winter. Provisions are dear with us. Flour is selling at 26 cents per pound, bacon 50 cents, bread 27

cents, sugar 3 pounds for a dollar (potatoes 12 cents when you can get them) and other things in proportion. I sent to Hope for my supply and got them a little cheaper. Freights from Hope here are 15 cents per lb. but I expect they will not be more than half that amount next summer. I have a good deal to write about but must postpone it at present. In a short time I expect we shall have some severe weather and then I shall have leisure to write. I have had but one day of rest since I came on this expedition and that was a Sunday. I have always had something to do on Sundays. The Government and its officers treat me as though I was one of its officials and I receive packages by most every express (marked O.H.M.S.) On Her Majesty's Service, which generally occupies my Sundays. I have paid out considerable money for the Government here and not made much out of it myself. I have His Excellency's, the Governor, promise that I shall certainly not be forgotten, but scripture says "put not your trust in princes". I am very grateful to dear Mother for her letter, I wish she would write longer ones. My love to all at home. Remember me to Miss Cunningham, I will try by and by to write to her. God bless you all is the prayer

Of your Aff. Son,

J.F. Allison

P.S. I wish I could assist Father to start a drugstore—at present I cannot. John West must write again. I am afraid I shall not get his letter from Victoria.

The beautiful bunch grass and seemingly endless range lands convinced him to try his hand at cattle raising as well as farming. After wintering in Hope, the spring of 1861 found John Allison riding over the Hope mountains, facing a new and challenging life. Parts of the trail, especially along the Skagit Bluff, were so narrow and treacherous that the packs

on the horses scraped against the rocky side of the bluff. The horses went in single file, each horse tied to the tail of the one ahead. Should it slip the others might hold him til he got his footing. Far below the Skagit River twisted like a narrow ribbon. The creeks were swelled with the spring run-off. Bridges were washed out. In some places that would be dry creek beds later on in the summer, John found himself riding for miles in water up to the horse's belly! On leaving the high mountains it was easy going as there were no small trees or undergrowth as there is today. The trees were tall pines growing on open, rolling range land. Coming over the brow of the last hill, he came to the Similkameen River (much smaller than it is today). It was easily forded.

When he rode around to reconnoitre, he found the lakes teeming with geese and ducks. Grouse and prairie chicken darted everywhere. Signs of wild game and fur bearing animals were plentiful. As dusk crept in he heard the lonesome call of the coyotes. To the Indians this land was paradise, especially given them by their great "Sacalee Tye" (God).

In summer they camped everywhere and anywhere. Fortunately the Similkameen Indians were a peaceful tribe, not at all war-like. They had strange customs and avenged themselves when a wrong had (or they thought) been done to them. They were as honest as the day is long. When they moved down the valley in the fall, they left their ictas or goods hanging in a tree—no one would think to steal them (Blankets, buckskins, pots, pans, etc.)

John acquired a partner, an American from the state of Maine, a Mr Hays. Together they bought a hundred head of Durham cattle, turned them loose in the bunch grasses and they soon swelled to a thousand head. The cattle thrived on the good feed. The winters proved too severe for the cattle so the partners set on driving the cattle to their land in the Okanagan each fall until spring. The place was called Sunny

Side. They built a cabin for Mr Hays. John was back and forth between the places as they had decided to keep the young stock at the Similkameen ranch. They built large, round cedar cattle sheds to confine the cattle in during the cold winter days. There was a large stand of cedar near the Willow Springs (as it was known then) so even their fencing was cedar.

John burnt coal which he dug out of the mountain on the other side of the river. He had taken samples of the coal to Governor Douglas who had them sent to England to be analyzed. The report came back; it was a good quality of lignite but not marketable at that time. He also reported on the copper vein in this area.

On one of his many trips to Hope for supplies and to visit with friends, the Landvoights, he met a young lady, Susan Moir. They were later married at Hope in 1867. The same church they said their vows in still stands, it is in good repair. The church boasts of its original rug, presented it by Queen Victoria. Though its colours may be faded, a piece of it still proudly lays on the altar with its concealed darns and mends.

There were, through the years that followed, fourteen children born to the Allison's in Similkameen. Of eight girls and six boys, all reached maturity—a feat indeed for those perilous times. When one considers, however, the character of the gallant lady who bore them all, with only her husband or Indian midwives to assist, added to the sterling qualities of their father, it is not difficult to see how some lived well into their ninetieth year.

He had much good fortune and took care of his parents when his father's health failed. He saw his sister Carolyn through school, and also his little brother George. His religious upbringing, sense of duty and fair play guided him through many vicissitudes in life. He stepped on no man, but helped many along the way.



About the year 1896, the family home was destroyed by flooding and a newly constructed barn, as yet unused for the cattle, was put into service as a temporary dwelling for some time. In the fall of 1897, while roofing a temporary addition to the barn to be used as extra family space, John, then in his seventy-second year, succumbed to chills and fever.

He took to his bed while two of the elder sons made a hasty dash by horseback to Hope and as far as Agassiz to enlist the aid of a doctor. Country doctors in those times were not always readily available and so the boys had to return alone, unsuccessful.

A heroic medical man whose name unfortunately has been lost to us in the passing of time, did hear of the two anxious young Allison's seeking help for their father, and made the long ride over the pass to Similkameen.

He arrived in time to find John Allison in the final, and in those days, fatal stages of plural pneumonia from which he soon died. He was survived by his wife Susan Louisa Moir Allison by nearly forty years, she living on to her 93rd year. A host of descendants and place names such as "Allison Pass", "Allison Flat", "Allison Lake", remain as living memorial to John Fall Allison, adventurer, trail blazer and Similkameen's first settler.

WRITTEN THIS YEAR OF 1976 BY  
Aurelia Angela Allison-McDiarmid.

It is not the things we do  
But the things we might have done  
That bring a little sadness  
At the setting of the sun.

—Penned by George Allison, brother of  
John Fall Allison

## POSTSCRIPT

In 1930, the old Anglican church in Oriskany, New York where Robert Allison (father of John) and his family worshipped, celebrated its one hundredth anniversary.

Some of the family, though living in other parts, were invited to attend. In a letter to me from Elizabeth, wife of my nephew Robert of Salt Lake City, she states, "The original home where the Allisons lived is a charming house, sitting back among the trees, and is still occupied after a century and more."

This book was published in January, 1977

