

# The Call of the Wild

MT. BAKER, CLARK GABLE, AND THE MORALITY CLAUSE

Story by John D'Onofrio · Wednesday, February 2, 2011



The winter of 1934-35 was a particularly harsh one in Whatcom County with storm after storm arriving across the water. The kind of winter that

old-timers talk about. In those innocent days, the upper Nooksack was practically terra incognita; before the ski area, before espresso drive-thus, before tourism. Except for the ever encroaching loggers, the woods of the north fork were empty, save for the ghosts of disappeared trappers and hard-luck miners.

While a lodge had been built at Mount Baker in 1929, it was only used in the summer. In 1931 it burned to the ground.

The crew filming Jack London's classic *Call of the Wild* arrived in December of '34, drawn to the location by the the photogenic appeal of Mt. Shuksan. The book, published in 1903 was an established classic - considered London's masterpiece - and there were high hopes that the film would be a sensation. Two previous film renditions had been made but this would be the first one deploying that modern innovation: sound. It was also to be the last film released by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Pictures before the company merged with Fox Film Corporation to become 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox. Clark Gable, of course, starred.

He was directed by William Wellman and it became obvious as filming continued over that hellacious winter that the two did not get along. It didn't help that Mr. Gable had initiated a...shall we say...intimate relationship with co-star Loretta Young up at Heather Meadows, a liaison which would result in the birth of a daughter in November of '35: Judy Lewis. Because of the "morality clause" typical in actor's contracts at the time, Judy's paternity was denied and she was raised as Loretta Young's adoptive daughter, not discovering that Clark Gable was, in fact, her father until 1994. What a life!

And what a winter! The snow piled up in heroic drifts, burying equipment and sets. The road to the mountain had always closed when the snow began to fall, piling up in ungodly drifts, but this was 1935 and serious movie stars were in Heather Meadows. So they tried mightily to keep the road open.

They failed.

Gable, Young and the rest were stranded, cut off from the admiring world for days at a time by mad blizzards and hurricane winds. According to the crew, out in the wind beneath Table Mountain, the cameras began to freeze, adding to the already tense situation.

But the show went on. And as we've seen, Gable and Young managed to stay warm. Filming was completed in March of '35 and the crew decamped for more hospitable climes. The film premiered on August 9<sup>th</sup> of that year. It was a sensation and Mt. Baker, as they say, was on the map. For the first time, the road to Mt. Baker was kept (intermittently at least) open through the winter.

Although it wouldn't be until 1953 that the first ski lift would be constructed, the notion of Mt. Baker as a ski destination was born that winter along with Judy Lewis.