

THE LAST GREAT GOLD RUSH

By Gary L. Blackwood

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A CENTURY AGO hundreds of thousands of men—and a handful of women—left their jobs, their homes, their families, and trekked north to the frozen Yukon in hopes of scratching a fortune from the permafrost. Of all those people, probably fewer than 40,000 actually reached the gold fields. About half that number did any real prospecting, and only about 4,000 miners struck pay dirt. Of those who did, just a small fraction became wealthy.

The great Klondike Gold Rush did make the fortunes of a great many people, but for the most part, they were the men and women of business who followed in the wake of the gold seekers, providing food and shelter, equipment and entertainment.

A few hundred early bird prospectors had been chasing rumors of gold around northwest Canada since the 1870s, but it wasn't until 1896 that someone uncovered a vein so rich, its fame spread to the "outside." Just who first found the gold is uncertain. It could have been George Washington Carmack, an easygoing fisherman and occasional prospector. Or it might have been one of his Indian friends, Skookum Jim and Tagish Charley.

The three men were camped on Rabbit Creek near the Klondike River. One of them went to wash a frying pan in the creek and turned up a thumb-sized nugget—just the tip of the iceberg of gold that lay underneath.

When George Carmack spread the news of the strike, as required by the unwritten Prospector's Code, nearly everyone laughed at him. George had made so many so-called "strikes" before, he'd earned the nickname "Lying George." But a few *cheechakos* (an Indian word for "newcomers") went to investigate, then a few more. Within five days, the valley of Rabbit Creek—now rechristened Bonanza Creek—was flooded with people staking claims all around Carmack's, and on an even richer tributary called Eldorado Creek.

This first rash of claims was by far the most profitable. By the following spring, some 80 miners had dug up fortunes of \$25,000 to \$500,000 apiece. The gold wasn't worth much in the Yukon itself, because there was nothing to buy with it. But the outside world was in the throes of an economic depression and gold shortage, and when steamships

docked in San Francisco and Seattle in July 1897, and a whole troop of scruffy miners stepped off carrying two tons of gold in suitcases, blankets, boxes, and coffee cans, it created a sensation. An epidemic of gold fever swept the country.

The popular books by Horatio Alger had been telling Americans for years that, with a little luck and pluck, anyone could succeed, and this seemed the perfect chance to prove it. Within ten days 1,500 Klondikers set sail from Seattle alone, headed for the gold fields. Streetcar drivers abandoned their trolleys, and a fourth of the Seattle police force walked off the job; even the mayor resigned and bought a steam boat to carry miners North.

That was just the beginning. The fever wasn't confined to the United States and Canada; ships full of gold seekers sailed from Arabia, China, Brazil, Turkey, Sweden, and a group of Maoris set out from New Zealand.

The gold seekers found that it took more than just Horatio Alger's famous "pluck" to reach the gold fields: it took a considerable amount of capital. The output of gold from the Yukon in 1898, its best year, topped \$10 million, but the goldstruck Klondikers laid out over \$60 million on equipment and supplies alone. A proper Klondike outfit, including mining tools, an iron stove, and a year's worth of food, cost roughly \$500 and weighed 1,500 to 2,000 pounds.

All that weight and all those people had to be transported North somehow. The long "rich man's route" by steamboat up the Yukon River to Dawson could cost \$1,000. Even the shorter passage from Seattle to Skagway, Alaska, was beyond most people's budgets, and thousands turned back after selling their outfits for whatever they could get. The more determined pressed on and, after unloading their equipment on the mud flats of Skagway, still faced 600 miles of wilderness, traversed by two equally unappealing routes.

The 45-mile Skagway Trail was the choice of those who could afford a pack animal, because the climb was relatively gradual. But it was far from easy. It led over bogs and boulders, crossed and recrossed rivers, and cut across slippery slate cliffs where a single misstep meant a 500 foot fall. Only the hardest pack animals survived, and the bodies of thousands of underfed and overpriced horses littered the way, giving the route the name "Dead Horse Trail."

Those who chose the steeper Dyea Trail carried their outfits on their backs, 100 pounds at a time, or hired Indian packers at up to \$1.00 a pound. It took the average person three months and 40 trips to haul an entire outfit over the grueling Chilkoot Pass. When the snow grew deep on the pass, an enterprising group of men carved 1,500 steps into the icy slope, then collected so much in tolls that miners dubbed the passage "The Golden Stairs."

Even after conquering the Chilkoot Pass, the miners weren't home free. They had over 500 miles of lakes and rivers to navigate; that meant cutting down trees and building boats—most of them pretty crude ones. Even for a well-built craft, some stretches of the route were so deadly that most men had to hire experienced sailors to get through safely. Young Jack London, who later based *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* on his Klondike adventures, earned \$3,000 piloting boats through the ferocious rapids of Miles Canyon.

Despite all the obstacles and dangers, the regular passenger boats were still so overloaded that all sorts of ramshackle vessels were pressed into service; many earned their nickname of "floating coffins" by going down with their passengers on board. And in the winter of 1897 alone, 22,000 hopeful cheechakos slogged up the agonizing slope of Chilkoot Pass, so close on each other's heels in the "Chilkoot lock step" that anyone tired or foolish enough to rest beside the trail might have to wait a day or more to find a place in line again.

There was no shortage of entrepreneurs eager to take the gold seekers' money in exchange for goods or services. All it took to appeal to a man or woman with gold fever was to tack the word "Klondike" onto the name of a product. There were Klondike electric gold pans, Klondike medicine chests, Klondike mining schools, a Klondike bicycle, even a portable folding Klondike house that boasted it was "light as air"—an extremely doubtful claim, considering it included a double bed and an iron stove.

Inventors dreamed up an array of devices that promised to make the back breaking task of prospecting positively pleasant. Nikola Tesla, one of the pioneers of electricity, offered an x-ray machine that supposedly detected precious metals deep under the ground. The less scientifically minded could hire a psychic to pinpoint rich veins of gold. The Trans-Alaskan Gopher Company proposed to train gophers to claw through frozen gravel and uncover nuggets.

Hundreds more hardy and adventurous souls went North to set themselves up in business near the gold fields. Harriet Pullen, a widow with several children, arrived in Skagway with \$7.00 in her pocket. She turned it into a fortune, driving a freight wagon over the Skagway Trail by day, and by night baking apple pies in pans hammered out of discarded tin cans.

Joe Brooks, a successful teamster, owned 335 mules and raked in \$5,000 a day through methods that weren't always scrupulous; if he was hauling a load and got a better offer, he wasn't above dumping the first shipment in the mud alongside the trail.

Belinda Mulrone, known as "The Queen of the Klondike," invested \$5,000 in clothing and hot-water bottles, sold them at a 600 percent profit, and used the money to

build a lunch counter, a roadhouse, and cabins that were bought before the roofs were even on. She also built the grand Fairview Hotel, which boasted brass beds, fine china, live chamber music, and electricity generated by a yacht in the harbor. Because of the shortage of wood, the interior walls were made of painted canvas.

As more and more gold seekers poured into Dawson in the spring of 1898, it became a regular city and a paradise for businessmen and women, who opened saloons, dance halls, hotels, and gambling houses. But even for the less ambitious, there was money to be made. One man sold the milk from his cow for \$20 a gallon. Another brought in a litter of kittens and sold all of them to lonely miners for two ounces of gold dust—apiece. Even the lowly workers who swept the floors of the dance halls and saloons could turn a tidy profit by sifting through the sawdust and gleaning the gold dust dropped by careless miners.

When the railroad made its way to Dawson, it spelled the end of opportunity for the individual miner and the beginning for the big mining companies, who brought in giant dredges that could do the work of dozens of men.

But by that time, most of the small time prospectors had deserted Dawson. In the spring of 1899, news reached the Klondike of another major strike outside Nome, Alaska, and a new rush was on. It never equaled the scope of the Klondike stampede, but plenty of die-hard miners migrated there, still seeking the fortune they'd failed to find in the Yukon. And right behind them came the men and women of business; once again they would be the ones who would profit most from this new outbreak of gold fever.

THE KLONDIKE ADVENTURE is probably the most celebrated gold rush in history. But it was only one of a series of epidemics of gold fever that swept the country between the middle and end of the nineteenth century.

The first, and biggest, began with the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in California in January 1848. It brought over 200,000 gold seekers swarming in from all over the world. They unearthed enough gold—a cool quarter of a billion dollars' worth—to make the governor of California nervous; he was afraid the precious metal would become so common that it would be worthless. Instead, all that wealth turned the United States into one of the world's richest nations.

A few individuals grew enormously rich—one man dug up a single nugget that weighed 195 pounds!—but most of the hopeful miners ended up broke, just as they did in the Klondike.

The merchants thrived, however. One of the biggest success stories was that of Levi Strauss, who went West with dozens of bolts of tent material—then decided the fabric would make better trousers. He was right. They're even more popular today; we call them jeans.

In 1859 a huge vein of gold and silver—the fabled Comstock Lode—was discovered in western Nevada. Major gold strikes in the Pikes Pea area of Colorado and in the Black Hills of South Dakota also brought miners—and merchants—pouring in. The weather and the landscape weren't as formidable as in the Yukon, so many of the disappointed miners stayed on and built real towns, alongside the businessmen and women who had prospered there. Some of these towns, like Deadwood, South Dakota, and Cripple Creek, Colorado, now attract a whole new breed of gold seekers who come to try their luck in the gambling casinos.

Up in the Klondike, Dawson is still alive and well, too, thanks to a brisk tourist trade; it's especially lively during the third week in August, when the town celebrates Discovery Days. This year marks the hundredth anniversary of that first strike on Bonanza Creek.