A Gold Fever Burns: The Impact of Prospectors on the Klondike

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On August 16, 1896, Skookum Jim and Kate Carmack, both members of a local tribe of Tagish First Nations’ people, and Kate’s husband, George Carmack, discovered gold under the ice along Bonanza Creek, in an area now known as Dawson, Yukon Territory, Canada. (National Park Service). More specifically, the area containing Dawson is the Klondike, a region of Yukon Territory in northwest Canada. 11 months later, the S.S. Portland arrived in Seattle from the banks of the Klondike River, carrying 68 miners and a cargo of “more than a ton of solid gold,” according to the Seattle Post-Intelligencer (Cruiseline History). Another newspaper referenced, “the gold-plated fields of Alaska (Klondike Midnight Sun).” Headlines like, “Gold! Gold! Gold! Gold! Stacks of yellow metal!” (National Park Service) spread from the Northwest newspapers like wildfire, and an estimated 100,000 prospectors rushed to Yukon Territory, where they encountered the First Nations’ people, extreme weather, and a lack of food or shelter. Out of the daring men who attempted the journey, about one third survived the shockingly harsh conditions of the Klondike, and survivors went on to establish cities like Dawson and Whitehorse (Porsild, 25). A lucky few found riches in gold, while some made their fortune by selling supplies or timber, and others returned home disappointed and bankrupt. The “Yukoners,” as they were called, took a risk by exploring the remote and untamed Klondike area of Yukon Territory, and negatively impacted the things they encountered, including the First Nations’ people, the physical environment, and Dawson’s developing economy, which had a lasting effect on the Klondike and the men who explored it, but also serve as a lesson for people today.

Many of the encounters between prospectors and First Nations’ people had negative effects on the First Nations. The term “First Nation” refers to a government-recognized band of native peoples in Canada. They were the sole inhabitants of Canada for over 12,000 years.
Because prospectors explored the region around the Klondike river, the Tagish and Tlingit were the tribes who encountered prospectors moving to Dawson City (First Nations in the Past). The majority of these encounters were negative for the First Nations’ people, like one recorded by American journalist and explorer Tappan Adney. He describes the facial features of Tlingit women in a judgemental way: “[They have] a hideous, repulsive expression (Adney, 94).”

Adney describes Tlingit food and supply packers, who were known to be efficient businessmen as, “not trustworthy, and wholly unscrupulous (Adney, 95).” Even when Adney recognizes First Nations’ people in his account to have "traders' instinct," implying that they make good trades, he is not satisfied with the exchange of goods and harbors a bad impression of them as trading partners; in his diary, he writes that they were “dirty pilfering thieves” during the trade (Adney, 155).

Tappan Adney's book, *The Klondike Stampede*, was written in 1900, and as a well-known and widely-supported journalist, his views of the natives of the Klondike were shared by most Americans at the time. Today, Americans still hold prejudice against the First Nations’ people because of the judgements passed during these encounters (Council of Yukon First Nations).

The exchange of disease and violence between Yukoners and First Nations’ people had negative effects on the First Nations that are felt today. Diseases, such as pneumonia, smallpox, and typhoid fever, and violence were exchanged between the First Nations’ people and prospectors (University of Manitoba, 3). Not only did contagious diseases like measles kill by spreading from person to person in Dawson, smallpox affected the First Nations’ people by spreading down the Klondike River from Bonanza Creek to where the Han, a fishing tribe of First Nations’ people, lived after being moved to a reserve to make way for prospectors. Disease polluted their water source and fish, which led to an extreme decline in their population. Today,
their language is the most endangered one in Canada (AlaskaWeb). Although there was little violence in Dawson, at the nearby border between the United States and Alaska, mobs and violence broke out after an encounter between the Assiniboine First Nations’ people and European American whisky traders led to the extremely violent Cypress Hills Massacre. The gunfire exchanged during the massacre led to more native deaths than deaths of the traders involved (Canada History). From that point, violence near the border became the norm, which resulted in the death of many First Nations’ people as trades went bad and white people attempted to assimilate natives into white culture (Yukon Alaska). The Klondike Nugget newspaper reported in 1900, “[The First Nations have] come in contact with what we are pleased to term civilization. Civilization will ultimately wipe the Indians out of existence (The Klondike Nugget).” This shows the utter disregard for the culture of the First Nations’ people. Not only did the Yukoners disregard the wellbeing of the natives of the Klondike, they also damaged its physical environment.

After making the difficult journey to the Klondike, prospectors began a damaging exchange of natural resources for industrialization and the death of plants and animals, negatively impacting the nature they encountered. Getting to the Klondike was difficult for those who explored it because of its extreme weather. Many who set off for the Klondike in search of gold, especially during the beginning of the gold rush, did not bring adequate supplies to survive temperatures that could get down to -60 degrees Fahrenheit (Berton, 96). A famous photograph taken by Major James Skitt Matthews, an archivist and historian, depicts men struggling to cross the Chilkoot Pass, which was infamous for being steep and extremely dangerous (The Canadian Encyclopedia) (Appendix I). However, once those who survived the journey reached the
Klondike River Valley, they were relieved to encounter pristine land full of trees. Men arriving in Dawson started a lucrative timber industry, and used the resource of wide open spaces of land to start building cities. The influx of hundreds of thousands of people into the Klondike caught the Canadian government off guard. Prospectors ignored basic conservation practices as they destroyed what nature spent eons to grow and natives regarded as sacred in just one year, from 1898 to 1899. The combination of logging, deforestation, and untended fires left along the river--which grew into wildfires--destroyed countless trees, which led to a decrease in the population of native people and animals as they died in the fires or relocated (AlaskaWeb). The Canadian and United States governments’ support of development in exchange for deforestation and damage to the inhabitants of the Klondike has had long-term effects on the region. The erosion of the environment could perhaps have been justifiable if the economy of the area had, in fact, developed in a permanent way. But that is not what happened.

A boom in Dawson’s economy occurred in the first few years of its existence, when the population swelled to 40,000 people. Its bust was not far behind. Because of the sensationalized nature of the gold rush, especially at its beginning, the vast majority of those intrepid enough to go to the remote city were there because of an interest in mining and a desire to get rich quickly (National Park Service). For under a year, Dawson was a city of millionaires known as “Klondike Kings.” Among them were George and Kate Carmack and Skookum Jim, the people who first discovered gold there and were able to establish a secure position (University Libraries). Many who lived nearby had little to no mining success but still were interested in attempting to make a fortune. These people encountered many ways to earn money and start an economy, like selling supplies like shovels or turning to prostitution. One photo taken by Pierre
Berton, who conducted research in Dawson over 12 years, shows a group of prostitutes in an alley (Appendix II). The photo shows that prostitution was one of the main roles women played in Dawson. As a result of people selling goods in Dawson, more encounters with the First Nations’ people occurred, because the native packers were paid by explorers to carry goods. The First Nations’ people, who were given up to 83 cents per pound carried, used this money to purchase desirable supplies from stores in Dawson, which benefited them (Yukon Alaska).

Because of the rush to explore the Klondike, Dawson and its surrounding structures were overcrowded and hastily constructed. On the morning of April 26, 1899, a girl in a dance hall dropped a lamp, which started a vicious fire through the crowded wooden buildings of Dawson. That day, the temperature was 45 degrees below zero, too cold for the boilers to run. Ironically, the firemen were on strike that day because the town council refused to meet the firemen’s demands for higher pay. More fires had to be set to access water frozen under ice in rivers, and by then, Dawson’s main street was destroyed. The fire wreaked havoc on the economy as bars of gold in banks melted, a million dollars were lost in damages, and almost every business was destroyed (Berton, 188). What the fire did to Dawson in 1899 is a lesson for today’s Canadian government; the disaster could have been avoided if the council took a long view of the town’s development, if they was less hasty to build, and willing to spend more money on municipal services. Later that year, the stampede of prospectors was slowing, because gold was becoming increasingly difficult to find in the overworked land, and prices for supplies and work were dropping rapidly. Finally, the discovery of gold in Nome, Alaska, prompted an exodus from Dawson (National Park Service). Tens of thousands left Dawson on steamships down the Klondike river, leaving the once booming city with a population of 8,000. Today, Dawson has
about 2,000 citizens (Yukon Communities). The emptying of Dawson should have been predicted from the start of the Klondike gold rush; the sensationalization of the gold rush prompted people with an interest in finding gold to gather in one place, and the high likelihood of gold being discovered elsewhere in Canada could predict that almost everyone in Dawson would leave at once.

Although a handful of people made a fortune by mining for gold at Bonanza Creek and then left for Nome, many of the Klondike Kings stayed in Dawson and died with little money to their names. George and Kate Carmack, and Skookum Jim, rare exceptions, ended up with a sizeable amount of money in mining royalties, and were wealthy at the time of their deaths (Discovery).

Although the prospectors negatively impacted the First Nations, the physical environment, and Dawson’s economy, the Klondike gold rush did have positive effects in the form of literature, the improvement of the economy, and the eventual development of Yukon Territory. Before the gold rush brought Americans into the Klondike, people in the US saw Canada as a wasteland. With the sensationalism of the gold rush came new, romanticized ideas of the Klondike being a place for brave adventurers (The Canadian Encyclopedia). In 1903, American author Jack London, inspired by his trip to the Klondike, wrote his novel, The Call of the Wild, which takes place in the Yukon (London). This book, along with the accounts of Pierre Berton and Tappan Adney, popularized the image of American adventurers in the Klondike. These authors’ award-winning works, such as The Klondike Stampede and The Klondike Quest are still famous, and they were inspired by the events of the gold rush. The gold rush did not improve the economy of Dawson long-term; however, the continental economy, which was
struggling with unemployment and a depression, benefited from prospectors spending money. The gold rush caused a rapid advance in the 1898 development of Canada’s Yukon Territory, with other small towns popping up such as Skagway and Dyea (The Canadian Encyclopedia). If gold had not been discovered in the Klondike, the development of the region would have been slower and more gradual because there would be no purposes for settling new towns, businesses, or establishing trade of natural resources to boost Canada’s economy. Although many people left those towns at the end of the Klondike gold rush, the towns are left with rich history, and they provide visitors today with a place to stay and observe the beautiful landscape of the Klondike. Sadly, as the First Nations’ people largely suffered from the boom, the few positive outcomes of the Klondike gold rush affect mostly white Americans. Arguments are still taking place over conservation and the rights of the First Nations in Canada today (National Geographic News).

While the gold rush made a few wealthy and boosted the overall economy of white Canadians, the people who explored the Klondike in search of gold had negative effects on everything else they encountered: the First Nations, the land, and the economy of Dawson. The Klondike gold rush is different than any other gold rush because the land of the Yukon was so incredibly pristine, respected, and rich with resources and wildlife before the stampede of prospectors explored the region. After the Stampede, the Yukoners who explored there left their footprint, exchanging natural resources for deforestation and forever damaging the ecosystem. The native tribes of Canada today still are aware of the negative effects of the gold rush (Canadian Parks and Wilderness Service).

In January 2014, the Yukon government opened the Peel Watershed, a vast region north of Dawson, for mining (National Geographic News). The Peel Watershed, up until that point,
had been one of the largest untouched ecosystems on the continent. Today, a battle ensues between First Nations, conservation groups, and the government, on whether to industrialize more of the 20,850 square mile wilderness. The First Nations argue that development and mining exploration requires building railroads into the Peel Watershed, which would cause irreversible damage to the environment (Canadian Parks and Wilderness Service). The Yukon government would do well to recall the damaging effects of the Klondike gold rush in deciding the fate of today’s Canadian wilderness. The scars explorers left on the First Nations’ people, the Klondike’s environment, and small towns’ economies through their encounters and exchanges can serve as a lesson for governments today.
Works Cited

Primary Sources

Adney, Tappan. *The Klondike Stampede*. Vancouver: UBC, 1994. Print. An excellent primary source (with sections of analysis and some reports not from the actual events) from a journalist, who documented his experience in the Yukon at the time of the Klondike gold rush with writings and many photographs.

Berton, Pierre. *The Klondike Quest*. Erin: Boston Mills, 1983. Print. This photographic essay was written by Pierre Berton, who spent years in the Klondike from 1897 to 1899 observing, researching, and recording the events of the Klondike gold rush. It gave me a view into the lives of the men and women who lived in the Klondike during the gold rush. The pictures I found especially useful were those of desperate prospectors in the rugged landscape of the Klondike, which show the hardship they had to endure and how they persevered.

“The Fate of the Yukon Indians.” *The Klondike Nugget* 1 Apr. 1900: n. pag. Print. This newspaper from Dawson showed more articles on politics than the Klondike Midnight Sun. It also included many advertisements, which helped me to understand the types of businesses in Dawson and sparked my interest on this topic.

“The Fight for the Peel Continues.” *Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society*. N.p., n.d. Web. 1 Feb. 2016. <http://cpawsyukon.org/campaigns/peel-watershed>. This informative article was my best source to learn about the current battle for the Peel Watershed and how the First Nations look to the past (the events of the Klondike gold rush) to inform their decision about mining rights today. The view of modern First Nations’ people gave me a
sense of how important the land is to their culture, and how it should be protected from development by the government.

*Klondike Midnight Sun* 1897. Print. This newspaper, the self-proclaimed “largest circulation of any decent newspaper published in the gold-plated fields of Alaska,” and published in “Dawson City, on the Yukon, midnight, 1897,” was an interesting look into the daily life of a member of Dawson, and showed some of the sensationalism of the Klondike gold rush.

London, Jack. *The Call of the Wild*. N.p.: Macmillan, 1903. Print. This book, which takes place in the Yukon, is an example of great American literature inspired by the Klondike gold rush. It was useful to my counterargument because I believe that Jack London’s work has positively contributed to American works of writing.


Secondary Sources

Berton, Pierre. *The Klondike Fever*. N.p.: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958. Print. The author spent his childhood in Dawson City and his teenage years as a worker in Klondike mining camps, and also spent 12 years conducting research in Dawson City for this colorful, detailed account of the Klondike Stampede. It showed the beginning of the gold rush, the harsh environmental conditions, and the way Dawson City was run.


and, along with first person accounts, the source of some of my information about their encounters with prospectors.


Porsild, Charlene. Gamblers and Dreamers. Vancouver: UBC, 1998. Print. This book showed the mental conditions of people in the Klondike during the gold rush, which is important to consider when discussing the effects of the gold rush.

Morrison, David R. The Politics of the Yukon Territory, 1898-1909. Toronto: n.p., 1968. Print. Although I did not use the material from this book in the text of my paper, it provided an interesting background into the politics of Dawson City, which was important to understand the workings of Dawson City with the Yukoners who lived there.


<http://web.b.ebscohost.com/> Description and historical context of post-Klondike Stampede damage.
Web. 31 Dec. 2015. <http://www.nps.gov/klse/learn/historyculture/index.htm>. The National Park Service’s page on Seattle’s history helped me to understand the root and cause of the Klondike gold rush, which was an important factor in knowing the events of the gold rush.


Web. 2 Dec. 2015. <http://cyfn.ca>. Finding reliable information about the Yukon First Nations’ people was important to my paper, and I used the history page of the website most to learn about the interactions between prospectors and First Nations’ people, and the effects of those encounters on the First Nations today.


“The Golden Stairs.” Discovery. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Dec. 2015.<http://klondike-history.discovery.com/>. This source was extremely useful for both overview and details of the beginning of the gold rush, the way gold was mined, and life in and around Dawson.

population-labour-force>. Provided the most current census of Dawson I could find.
Appendix I

This image, taken in 1897, is famous for depicting the scale of the enormous summit of the treacherous 33-mile-long Chilkoot Pass to the line of packers and prospectors climbing it on their way to the Klondike Gold Rush. This image shows an example of the extreme conditions of the route to reach the Klondike.

Appendix II

Warmly-dressed prostitute women in an alley in Dawson.