

Frank Norris

# Preserving the Klondike Gold Rush Legacy

---

In the late 1960s, United States and Canadian park officials seized a remarkable opportunity to preserve the primary remnants of the 1897-1898 Klondike Gold Rush. The gold rush “stampede” made their way to the Klondike over a 1,600-mile-long chain of oceans, trails, and rivers that stretched from the State of Washington to Yukon Territory. Because much of the inland portion of that route lapsed into wilderness once the rush ran its course, entire ghost towns, mining landscapes, and trailside artifacts by the thousands remained where they lay. The following account traces how the National Park Service and Canadian park authorities, working with state, provincial, and local agencies, were able to preserve the major gold rush-era resources.

One hundred years ago, the Klondike Gold Rush was in full swing. Tens of thousands of gold-mad “stampede” were on the way to the Klondike gold fields, located near the confluence of the Klondike and Yukon rivers in the center of present-day Yukon Territory. Some of the northbound throng were getting supplies in one of many west coast ports. Others were on an Inside Passage steamship, threading their way along the coast of British Columbia and southeastern Alaska. Still others hunkered down in the ports of Skagway or Dyea, Alaska, at the northern end of the Inside Passage. Those who had fallen prey to gold rush fever several months earlier were on their way over the coast mountains, camped in huge tent towns along either the Chilkoot Trail or the White Pass Trail. Those farthest along the way were encamped at either Lake Lindeman or Lake Bennett, at the northern end of those trails, building a boat and waiting for the ice to break. Everyone anxiously awaited breakup so that they could race down the Yukon River. They hoped to be among the first to reach Dawson City and the Klondike gold fields where, so rumors had it, the streets were paved with gold. It was a wild, exciting time. It was the “last grand adventure,” a chance for the desperate and adventurous to risk everything in the ultimate get-rich-quick scheme.

The gold discovery that started this madness had taken place in the summer of 1896. Skookum Jim, along with companions Dawson Charlie and

George Carmack, had found gold lying “like cheese in a sandwich” on a hot August afternoon on the banks of a small Klondike River tributary. However, the Yukon basin was so isolated from the rest of the world—particularly during the long, ice-bound winter—that few outsiders heard of the strike until mid-July 1897. Within two days of each other, two ships—*Excelsior* and *Portland*, en route to San Francisco and Seattle, respectively—landed with literally tons of Klondike gold and scores of miners to broadcast the extent of the newfound wealth. The rush was on. During the following year, some 100,000 people headed north.

By the summer of 1898, the dream of Klondike gold had fallen prey to grim reality. Upon reaching Dawson, the stampede” learned that the gold fields, though remarkably rich, were limited in their geographical extent. All land that had any possibility of yielding gold had been staked months earlier. Given that news, most of the stampede” lingered around Dawson City for awhile. However, many left the area and headed home with little to show for their efforts than a few gold nuggets and a wealth of hard-won experience. Those who remained in the Dawson area until the following spring heard an increasing number of rumors about a fabulous gold strike near the Bering Sea in northwestern Alaska. The Nome gold rush was on and the Klondike excitement soon faded into history. The two largest towns that erupted during the gold rush—Dawson City, Yukon Territory and Skagway, Alaska—remained active. But Dyea, Sheep Camp, Log Cabin, and other trailside towns were quickly abandoned. The trails themselves were soon swallowed up by the surrounding forests.

Tourists—“excursionists” in the jargon of the day—had been gawking at the wonders of southeastern Alaska’s Inside Passage for more than a decade before the gold rush. The construction of the White Pass and Yukon Route railroad in 1898-1900 gave visitors the opportunity to head inland and see the rugged gold rush routes for themselves. Rail trips paralleling the White Pass trail from Skagway, Alaska, to Bennett, British Columbia, were a standard part of the tourist regimen by 1910. By 1920, a small but increasing number of tourists were taking the railroad all the way north to its terminus at Whitehorse, Yukon Territory. The truly adventurous then boarded a White Pass riverboat and sailed down to Dawson. Travelers found that both Skagway and Dawson had a pleasant, tumble-down appearance that was seemingly unchanged from the “Days of ‘98,” and old-time residents were often on hand to enliven the visitors’ experience.

By the 1930s, many of the old-time residents had died or moved away, and the gold rush-era

buildings were beginning to fall prey to time and the elements. Far-sighted individuals recognized that the gold rush was one of the major events in north country history and that something needed to be done to preserve, for future generations, some of the gold rush buildings and trails. Elmer A. Rasmuson, a Skagway banker, advanced the idea of a “Skagway National Park” in 1933. The idea was kicked around the National Park Service for the next couple of years, but then died away. Several factors militated against preservation during that period. Neither the United States nor the Canadian government had much of an interest, nor much of a track record, of expending funds for preservation purposes. In addition, both Alaska and the Yukon were territories and thus received little attention from Washington and Ottawa, respectively. Local governments and private entities were either unconcerned or were financially unable to help. Buildings and trails on both sides of the border continued to deteriorate.

By the late 1950s, the preservation possibilities began to improve. Tourism to the north country increased to levels never seen previously. In 1959, Alaska became a state. Attitudes toward preservation improved. A small corps of local residents began to lobby for restoration work, both for civic beautification purposes and because of its long-term benefit to heritage tourism.

The first big step to popularize the gold rush era took place near Skagway in early 1961. The Alaska Youth and Adult Authority (the new state’s corrections department) decided, as a work project, to reopen the Chilkoot Trail to recreational hikers. Over the years, the original trail surface had become largely if not totally invisible. The new trail went over only part of the original right-of-way. The trail on the United States’ side of the border was completed by the summer of 1964. In 1968, Canadian corrections crews extended the route from the border (on the summit of Chilkoot Pass) north to Lake Bennett.

*Private businesses thrive along Broadway Street in downtown Skagway. Many were rehabilitated, using federally-sponsored matching grants, during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Photo courtesy NPS.*



The 1960s brought other signs of interest in the area’s gold rush history. In 1962, the National Park Service designated the Skagway-White Pass area as a National Historic Landmark. The National Park Service Advisory Board also showed an interest in the area; board members visited Skagway in both 1963 and 1965. For their part, Skagway citizens did what they could to perpetuate the gold rush atmosphere. The town council decided not to replace its old plank boardwalks with concrete, and it moved to rehabilitate the Arctic Brotherhood, a well-known city-owned landmark.

During this same period, Canadian officials were also active in gold rush preservation efforts. In 1961, the National Historic Sites Branch repaired S.S. *Keno*, an old Yukon River stern-wheeler located in Dawson City. The following year, the craft was used as a casino during the town’s Gold Rush Festival. In 1966, another old sternwheeler, S.S. *Klondike*, was moved across town to a display site in a Whitehorse park. Soon afterward, Canada’s Historic Sites and Monuments Board designated both vessels as National Historic Sites. On both sides of the border, the efforts taken during the early- to mid-1960s were piecemeal, but they signaled a growing interest in gold rush history and in the respective national governments’ willingness to fund preservation efforts.

In 1968, both nations became more serious in their efforts to preserve the gold rush corridor. After gaining permission from Alaska governor Walter Hickel, National Park Service planners compiled “Skagway, A Study of Alternatives.” The document envisioned three scenarios for the agency and recommended a course of action that called for a 977-acre park that would include just two buildings in the Skagway business district and a narrow corridor along the recently-opened Chilkoot Trail. The Canadians showed their interest by stationing a parks-agency staff person in Whitehorse. They expressed a growing interest in preserving the old Presbyterian church on the shore of Bennett Lake as an interpretive site. Beyond that, Canadian officials studied Klondike’s history “with the object of determining how best to preserve the relics and interpret the story of those exciting days.”

The park idea gained considerable momentum in 1969 when Canadian and United States park officials arranged a joint Chilkoot Trail hike. Some 20 officials from the federal, state, territorial, provincial, and local levels hiked the 33-mile trail over Labor Day weekend. Immediately afterward, they continued on to Dawson for an inspection tour. The group then flew back to Whitehorse, where United States and Canadian park officials produced a confidential report outlining a proposal

for an international historic park based upon the Klondike gold rush theme. The idea was approved by National Park Service Director George Hartzog, and subsequently by Secretary of the Interior (and former Alaska governor) Walter Hickel. On the Canadian side, park designations all along the gold rush corridor—at Bennett, Whitehorse, Dawson City, and in the gold fields—were enthusiastically backed by Jean Chretien, the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (and Canada's current Prime Minister). On December 31, 1969, the two countries issued a joint press conference calling for the collaborative development of a Klondike Gold Rush International Historic Park.

On the United States side, events moved in fits and starts from the proposal stage to legislative reality. In 1970, Edwin Bearss wrote a historic resources study of the proposed park. The following spring, the National Park Service issued a draft master plan. However, momentum then slowed and it was not until the spring of 1973 that the final master plan was approved. The plan was fairly uncontroversial. Both the State of Alaska and the City of Skagway liked the park idea. But the increased size and complexity of the park proposal—three separate units in Alaska, an additional small unit in Seattle, Washington, the proposed purchase of several Skagway commercial buildings, and a variety of public land jurisdictions in the area—slowed down the overall park development process. The first bill calling for a Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park was introduced in April 1973, but a crowded congressional agenda (including the Watergate controversy) delayed hearings until May 1975. The bill passed Congress on a voice vote and President Ford signed the park bill on June 30, 1976. The resulting Act called for a 13,000-acre park, including a mile-wide corridor along the Chilkoot Trail, a similar corridor along the upper portion of the White Pass Trail, the acquisition of 16 gold rush-era buildings within the Skagway Historic District, and a visitor center in Seattle's Pioneer Square District.

North of the border, the idea of a national park in the Chilkoot Trail corridor was advanced by a land-exchange agreement, announced in June 1973, between Canadian minister Jean Chretien and provincial official Jack Radford. However, the agreement was never finalized. In anticipation of a park that would have emerged from that agreement, Canadian park officials joined together with their counterparts from the United States to patrol recreational travel along the Chilkoot Trail. Each year, from early June through mid-September, United States rangers and Canadian wardens worked together to ensure a safe experience for the

thousands of visitors who trekked over the Chilkoot Trail.

The creation of a park on the Canadian side of the Chilkoot Trail corridor bogged down in negotiations between the federal and provincial governments. Anticipating a resolution of the administrative logjam, Parks Canada steered a planning process for the proposed park between 1986 and 1988. But the land transfer was not completed until the early 1990s. Environmental Minister Tom McMillan then moved to officially declare the Chilkoot Trail National Historic Site. It was established, at long last, on April 7, 1993.

Given that long-anticipated declaration, the park corridor that planners had first envisioned back in the late 1960s had finally been realized. Park units commemorating the gold rush had been established in Seattle, Washington; in Skagway and Dyea, the two port cities at the north end of the Inside Passage; along the two major trails surmounting the rugged Coast Mountains; in Whitehorse and Dawson City; and in portions of the Klondike gold fields.

Only one goal remained—that of an international historic park. Legislation creating the United States park had stated that an international park could not be declared until a similar park had been established in Canada. Shortly after the April 1993 designation, officials on both sides of the border explored the idea of an international park. All agreed that the concept was largely symbolic. After all, the two governments had been cooperating on Chilkoot Trail operations for more than 20 years and the designation of an international park did not imply that either government would need to surrender any of its management authority. Based on that mutual recognition, United States and Canada park officials have sounded out the international park idea to the top officials in their respective agencies. It is hoped, and anticipated, that the concept can be realized in time to declare an international park this year—the centennial of the Klondike gold rush. A dedication ceremony is planned for mid-August at the Bennett, British Columbia, train station. The ceremony will feature governmental dignitaries, current park officials, and those who helped make the park a reality.

---

*Frank Norris is a historian at the Alaska Support Office in Anchorage. During the 1980s, he spent several years at Klondike Gold Rush NHP in Skagway. He is the author of an administrative history of the park, and the co-author (with David Neufeld of Parks Canada) of Chilkoot Trail, Heritage Route to the Klondike, published by Lost Moose Press of Whitehorse in 1996.*