



Yukon Prospectors' Association

- Meetings
- Hall of Fame
- Prospector of the Year
- Metal Prices
- Honour Roll
- Yukon Geoscience Forum
- Home
- Contact Us
- Properties for Option
- Larry's Corner

THE DISCOVERY OF GOLD IN THE KLONDIKE - SUMMER OF 1896 by Patricia Ellis

(There are as many versions of the Klondike gold rush story as there are storytellers. This one, presented with permission of the author, was extracted from Ms. Ellis' Yukon Sketchbook: A Traveler's Companion, copyright 1992. Tagish Charlie or Charley is sometimes referred to as Dawson Charlie which is the moniker given him in this rendition.)

A drama now unfolds. All the ingredients are there from which great plays are written: amazing luck, greed, bigotry, irony and anguish--all set against a backdrop of pristine wilderness.

The main character, American George Carmack, casual prospector, and free spirit in the age of the work ethic, preferred the lifestyle of the local Tagish Indians. He lived part of the year at Dyea on the coast and part in the interior with his wife and her relatives. In eleven years of wandering the Territory, Carmack engaged in many occupations: packing on the Chilkoot, working on the church at Selkirk, operating a trading post and staking coal deposits near Five Finger Rapids.

The summer of 1896 found him, his wife Kate and her relatives, Skookum Jim and Dawson Charlie, at a traditional Indian fish camp at the junction of the Klondike and Yukon rivers. They were mainly interested in fishing and doing some logging for the new sawmill at Fortymile. A chance meeting on one of their logging expeditions with Nova Scotian Robert Henderson, a seasoned but fanatical prospector, changed all of their lives forever.

Because of the unwritten miners' code of sharing a find with another prospector, Henderson, who was having some luck on Gold Bottom Creek, urged Carmack to prospect also. But Henderson did not include Carmack's Indian friends. At a later meeting, Henderson refused to sell Jim some tobacco. These slights were remembered by the proud Indians. On such things, fate often hinges.

It was Skookum Jim who actually found the rich ground on Rabbit (Bonanza) Creek while moose hunting. Carmack insisted on staking the Discovery claim which was the largest. Skookum Jim staked #1 above and Dawson Charlie staked #2 below. The date was August 17, 1896.

Rushing off to Fortymile to register their claims, they did not bother telling Henderson of the find. News of the discovery spread fast and Fortymile soon emptied and all the rich ground around Bonanza was quickly staked.

Henderson, who was still patiently working back at Gold Bottom, finally emerged from the bush to find that he had missed the chance of a lifetime. Although early enough to stake

other ground, he never seemed to have the mysterious luck to ever possess a rich claim.

Dawson City, the site of an Indian fish camp only a short time before, sprang up rapidly and untidily. The natives were moved to a new village called Moosehide, and Dawson for a short time became the biggest city north of San Francisco.

EPILOGUE

Henderson, the disgruntled prospector, never did reap a rich find. Because of (William) Ogilvie's interest in him, the Canadian Government granted him a pension for his part in the discovery of the "Klondike Gold Fields". He prospected in the Dawson and Mayo areas, and was known to have lived in his Mayo cabin from 1920 to 1924. He died in 1933 in Vancouver.

Carmack left the North and eventually his Indian wife Kate. He remarried a business woman from Dawson--a "cigar store operator"--and settled comfortably in Seattle. His half Tagish Indian daughter, Graphie, followed and later inherited a small portion of his estate. He died in Vancouver in June of 1922, after giving a speech at a meeting of the Yukon Order of Pioneers there.

Dawson Charlie and Skookum Jim returned to Caribou Crossing, later known as Carcross. Charlie built a hotel and drowned in 1908, when he accidentally fell off the railroad bridge.

Skookum Jim (who had a daughter, Daisy), changed his name to James Mason and built a large house in Carcross. He continued prospecting. Jim died in 1916 at the age of sixty. His estate was left for the betterment of his people and the Skookum Jim Friendship Center in Whitehorse is his legacy. (See Skookum Jim's last will and testament on this site under his name in the Prospectors' Hall of Fame.)

* * * * *

Note: Robert Henderson (1857-1933), George Carmack (1850-1922), Skookum Jim Mason (circa 1855-1916) and Tagish Charlie (died 1908) were inducted into the Prospectors' Hall of Fame in 1988. Their names are engraved in the base of the prospector statue that watches over downtown Whitehorse from Main Street and Third Avenue.

The four men were inducted into the Canadian Mining Hall of Fame on January 20, 1999. Portraits of the inductees and a citation outlining their achievements hang in the University of Toronto's mining building.

Articles are published on this website with the permission of the authors.
The authors retain the full copyright to their work.
1998 - 2013 Yukon Prospectors' Association