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GEORGE FINCH: ONE OF FIRST YUKON PROSPECTORS, 1873-74

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(Information for this piece relied on *Two Years in the Klondike and Alaskan Goldfields 1896-1898* by prospector William Haskell, reprinted by University of Alaska Press, 1998; and the writings of George Snow, an early arrival over the Chilkoot Pass who prospected the Stewart River before opening the two-storey Grand Opera House in Circle City, Alaska, circa 1894.)

George Finch (Hall of Fame), a Canadian from Kingston, Ontario, was a former Hudson's Bay Fur Company employee who was prospecting in British Columbia when he was convinced to join Arthur Harper's party in 1872.

Harper (Hall of Fame) had been lured north from the California gold rush to the Fraser canyon and Cariboo stampedes of the 1850s and 1860s. Unsuccessful in finding gold, one of the four prospectors Harper convinced to undertake a protracted journey into unknown northern wilderness to look for gold-bearing creeks in the Yukon River basin was George Finch (sometimes recorded as Fitch).

Finch set off on this odyssey with Arthur Harper and Harper's life-long friend Frederick Hart, both born in County Antrim, Ireland, in 1835. Other party members were Andrew Kansellar, a German, and a Brit named Samuel Wilkinson, who abandoned the party early to prospect the Liard River.

Harper had a nose for knowing where gold should be found and had an acumen for leading others to the riches. But he was jinxed for finding large paying quantities himself.

The five men paddled down the Peace River in dugout canoes in September, 1872. In their outfit was a five-gallon keg of strong black rum. At every Hudson's Bay post visited, the jug was tapped and a cordial drink passed around. Every now and then, a thirsty soul would pull the cork and take a greedy swig instead of pouring out a shot. The hangover was merciless!

The adventurers crossed the height of land in winter that separated them from the Liard Basin. After the ice went out the next spring, 1873, they came by way of Sikanni Chief and the Fort Nelson rivers. At the confluence, they fortuitously met another party. Leroy Napoleon "Jack" McQuesten (Hall of Fame) was travelling with Alfred Henry Mayo and James McKniff.

While wintering at Nelson Forks, the two parties came to a decision to go back and pick up the Mackenzie River. They could drift downstream across the Arctic Circle and enter the Yukon River Valley via the Hudson's Bay Company's portage to the Porcupine River.

It was an arduous journey. Yet, they seemed to have made good time, despite splitting company at Fort Simpson where McQuesten was taking care of trading business.

In 1873, Harper and his companion continued prospecting and paddling their way to the mid-point of the Yukon River. Harper reported indications of gold everywhere on the Peace River; also on the Liard were colours; on the Mackenzie nothing; on the Peel fair prospects; on the Porcupine some colours; and on the Yukon--as Harper had prophesied--prospects were everywhere a pan was dipped.

Finch, McKniff and Harper left Fort Yukon, Alaska, and travelled 400 miles up the Yukon River to winter at White River.

Five Alaskan rivers are blessed with the name "White". The one where Finch and company went prospecting was the 200-mile-long river that heads in Alaska and flows northeast into Canada until it finds the Yukon River.

This large stream, referred to by the Chilkat Indians as "Sand River" due to its countless sandbars, was discovered and named "White in 1850 by Hudson's Bay explorer Robert Campbell because the silty water looked like liquid mud.

"There are immense deposits of volcanic ash up it which is in the form of an impalpable white powder, which is simply pulverized pumice-stone," explained Dominion land surveyor William Ogilvie (Honour Roll). "In rainy weather this washes into the river in such quantities that the water is actually thick with it and has a creamy white colour."

Around May, 1874, shortly after the river ice broke-up, Finch, McKniff and Harper came into Alaska Commercial Company's Tanana post. They reported food was plentiful at White River but gold prospecting was lousy.

That summer Finch accompanied his prospecting friends and Alaska Commercial's Fort Yukon agent down to the St. Michael's trading post where agent Moses Mercier was depositing furs and buying winter supplies to replenish the Fort Yukon station. From hereon, it is uncertain where Finch's prospecting trail led him.

In recognition of George Finch's 1873-74 prospecting efforts in the White River country, the Yukon Prospectors' Association inducted him into the Hall of Fame in 1988. His name is inscribed on a brass plate attached to the Hall of Fame artwork on display in the foyer of the Yukon administration building. His name also is engraved in the base of the bronze statue that watches over downtown Whitehorse from Main Street and Third Avenue.

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See related article [The Trading Trio of Arthur Harper, Al Mayo and Jack McQuesten.](#)