



# Yukon Prospectors' Association

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## ROBERT HENDERSON: DISCOVERER OF FIRST PLACER GOLD IN THE KLONDIKE BASIN by Jane Gaffin

Jane Gaffin is a Whitehorse-based freelance writer who specializes in mining.

Robert Henderson (1857-1933), a towering six-footer, migrated north to the Yukon District from the Colorado mines. The 29-year-old rugged, blue-eyed, likeable Nova Scotian was broke. Hunting gold had obsessed him since boyhood in Big Island, where he had never intended to follow in his father's career as a lighthouse keeper.

Grubstaked in the Yukon by a French Canadian agent for Alaska Commercial Company, Henderson investigated Indian River and its tributaries.

The story goes that while crossing the divide, Henderson found gold in August, 1896, and invited others from their Indian River prospecting to join him at Gold Bottom Creek. Once, Henderson poled out for extra supplies and on his return trip paused to tell the gold news to George Washington Carmack, a white member of a salmon-fishing party on the Thorn Duick (Klondike) River.

In an early-1900 Dawson City newspaper account, Henderson is credited with discovering the first gold in the Klondike Basin that led to other discoveries and culminated into a full-blown gold rush. After the world-famous Klondike gold rush subsided, Henderson was working for the government as assistant to the territorial mining engineer.

While in this capacity, Henderson penned a newspaper article captioned How to Outfit for Prospecting. He gave a detailed list of the exact quantities of food and supplies the prospector must pack to survive the winter. He wrote explicit instructions on the kind treatment of the dogs and how to build a comfortable cabin.

But most important was the selection of a partner. "Your partner on a prospecting trip should be a man with whom you are well acquainted and of jovial and optimistic disposition. Avoid arguments, especially of a religious or political nature, and the golden adage 'a kind word turneth away wrath' is nowhere so forcibly realized as in the wilderness.

Henderson, along with 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.

It is unknown who nominated the quartet for induction into the Canadian Mining Hall of Fame or who accepted the awards during the presentation ceremony on January 20, 1999.

The awards dinner at the Royal York Hotel in Toronto marked the eleventh year inductees had been recognized for making significant contributions to various aspects of the Canadian mining industry.

Portraits of the Hall of Fame inductees and a citation outlining their achievements hang in the University of Toronto's mining building.

The four men were given rite of passage into both Halls of Fame for discovering Klondike gold on August 17, 1896, that sparked the world-famous Klondike Gold Rush of 1896-98 and changed the course of Yukon history.

When news of a major strike reached the Outside world, 30,000 stampeder flooded into the boom camp that exploded into Dawson City, a town named after George M. Dawson of the Geological Survey of Canada.

The Yukon District was carved away from the Northwest Territories to create the Yukon Territory as a separate entity on June 13, 1898, so the Canadian government could collect liquor taxes.

As with any major mineral discovery, disagreements still rage as to who should be rightfully credited with the gold discovery on Rabbit Creek, subsequently renamed Rabbit Creek.

It is generally accepted that all four men played a part in setting off the great event. Over a hundred years later, the Klondike was still strong as a vibrant placer mining district. Many Yukon residents are descendants of the original discoverers and of some of the adventurers who came with the Klondike gold rush and never left.

Klondike is a word coined from Thron Duick. A ridge at Quartz Creek's headwaters separated Indian River from the unknown river called Thron Duick, an Indian name meaning "full of fish" or "hammer water", as some say. The word was mispronounced by white men until they coined "Klondike".

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