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TAGISH (a.k.a. DAWSON) CHARLIE: A CO-DISCOVERER OF KLONDIKE GOLD

by Jane Gaffin

(Information for this piece has relied on **Yukon Places and Names** (2003), an invaluable reference book compiled by the late mining engineer R.C. "Bob" Coutts of Atlin, British Columbia.)

Tagish Charlie's name is synonymous with the co-discovery of Klondike placer gold on August 17, 1896, that set off one of the world's largest gold rushes.

Charlie (d. 1908), George Carmack (1850?-1922), Skookum Jim Mason (c. 1855-1916) and Robert Henderson (1857-1933) were inducted into the Prospectors' Hall of Fame in 1988. Their names are engraved in the base of the prospector statue that stands watch over downtown Whitehorse at Main Street and Third Avenue.

The foursome were inducted into the Canadian Mining Hall of Fame in 1999 for igniting this social phenomenon. Their pictures and citations outlining their achievements hang in the University of Toronto's mining building.

Regarding discovery of gold in the Klondike gold fields, nothing is defined in black and white but is rather obscured in shades of gray. Distilled through many re-tellings, historians have done their best in piecing together and interpreting conflicting information.

It is generally accepted that Robert Henderson found the first gold in the Klondike gold fields on Gold Bottom Creek, although its yields were not significant. It is further accepted that George Carmack, Skookum Jim and Tagish Charlie found gold on the rich gold-bearing Rabbit Creek, subsequently renamed Bonanza.

Carmack stayed out of the dispute. He refused to attack the stories and characters of the other gold-rush principals. He simply took credit for finding gold on Bonanza Creek. What others wanted to do with the story was their business.

In 1962, the Canadian government erected a bronze plaque on the Discovery claim on Bonanza Creek near Dawson City, bestowing honours on Carmack, Skookum Jim and Tagish Charlie.

Mr. Coutts' exhaustive research puts a slightly different slant on history. First, the writer indicates George Washington Carmack was born on September 24, 1860 (not 1850), in Port Costa, California, after his parents had crossed the continent by ox-team and Conestoga wagon.

In 1885, Carmack went north to Alaska, crossing the Chilkoot Pass with seven other men

from trailhead at Dyea, Alaska, into the Yukon. Carmack was undoubtedly the misfit as historians sometimes purported, probably because he was a young man out to experience the world to its fullest and was seeking adventure.

Contrary to popular thought, Mr. Coutts described him as intelligent and well-educated. His cabin at Carmacks, a namesake settlement on the Yukon River at the mouth of the Nordenskiöld River (NTS 115I), was said to contain an organ which he played and many volumes of classical literature which he read. He subscribed to *Scientific American* and other literary journals and wrote romantic poetry.

He had met and appreciated the Tagish Indians, took Kate as his wife, and adopted the native lifestyle. Tagish Charlie was identified only as a nephew of Skookum Jim Mason and his sister Kate.

In 1887, Skookum (a Chinook Indian word for "strong"), Carmack and Kate worked for William Ogilvie. They packed the Dominion Land Surveyor's supplies over the Chilkoot Pass from Dyea, and accompanied him all the way to Forty Mile, a settlement on the Yukon River named for its location 40 miles below the reference point of Fort Reliance.

At Fort Reliance, Jack McQuesten had established an Alaska Commercial Company post in 1871. McQuesten and his partner Arthur Harper built another post at Forty Mile in 1886.

In 1893, Carmack found a seam of coal near Five Finger Rapids and another near Tantalus Butte. Both are near the present village of Carmacks, where Carmack built a cabin and carried on a certain amount of fur trading with the local Indians.

Some historic accounts indicate Carmacks was not much interested in coal. Mr. Coutts found that Arthur Harper backed Carmack's coal ventures and owned a 50 percent interest in them. Harper was an Irishman prospector and trader who had come to the Yukon from the Cariboo country in 1873.

In 1896, Carmack, his wife Kate, Skookum Jim and Tagish Carlie were salmon fishing at the mouth of the Klondike River when Robert Henderson came upon the party.

Henderson, a six-foot Nova Scotian, grubstaked by trader Joe Ladue, had spent two years prospecting Indian River tributaries. In 1896, he crossed the divide between Quartz Creek, which flows from King Solomon's Dome to the Indian River (NTS 115O), and the west branch of what would become known as Hunker Creek. He found low gold values on a stream he hoped was richly coated at bedrock with the precious metal. For luck and based on wishful thinking, he named it Gold Bottom Creek.

Henderson went down the Indian River to the settlement of Ogilvie (Sixty Mile) for more supplies. On his way, he encountered the fishing party and told of his find. This is where the story gets murky. Perhaps he only invited Carmack to visit his creek. If he did not want to share the creek with the Indians, why would Henderson bother telling a white man who had obviously befriended the Indians?

In early August, Carmack, Skookum Jim and Tagish Charlie persuaded each other to visit Henderson, who was recovering very little from his Gold Bottom claims. On their way, the threesome went up Rabbit Creek and found encouraging showings of gold. After examining Henderson's unimpressive showings, Carmack staked a claim, anyway, and the group left. They returned to the mouth of the Klondike River along Rabbit Creek.

On August 16, 1896, the three men found rich, coarse gold in the gravels of Rabbit Creek when they were returning from an inspection of Henderson's diggings on Gold Bottom Creek. The next day, August 17, observed as Discovery Day, Carmack staked the Discovery claim. He is alleged to have written the word "bonanza" on a strip of bark and nailed it to the Discovery post. Rabbit Creek was officially renamed Bonanza Creek.

Not observing the unwritten code of the creeks, they evidently did not return to share the news with Henderson.

When news reached the Outside world, the gold rush began. The town of Dawson City sprang up practically overnight. It was named for George M. Dawson, a director of the Geological Survey of Canada (1895-1901).

Dubbed the "Paris of the North", Dawson City was the capital of the Yukon from 1897 to 1951 when the capital seat was moved to Whitehorse. But Dawson retained its status as the Klondike capital.

After August, 1896, Tagish Charlie was tagged "Dawson" Charlie. Like Skookum Jim and Carmack, Charlie's Klondike claim on Bonanza Creek made him a wealthy man.

In an area close to his home at Carcross, south of Whitehorse, he staked mineral claims in 1903. The stream, named "Dawson" Charlie Creek (NTS 105D), is a tributary to the Wheaton River flowing from Gold Hill.

On July 4, 1903, Charlie staked the Discovery claim on Fourth of July Creek (NTS 115G), a tributary to the Jarvis River in the Kluane region. In 1903, he found payable gold in the Kluane district and started a rush that lasted several years.

Both Skookum Jim and Charlie prospected widely in the southern Yukon and grubstaked their brethren.

According to Mr. Coutts, a special act of Parliament, dated July 2, 1904, granted Charlie "all the rights and privileges of a white citizen". He could vote, sue or be sued, hold office, buy and drink liquor. He was returning home from a celebration on January 26, 1908. At Carcross, he fell off the White Pass & Yukon Route bridge and went through the ice and drowned.

Skookum Jim died after a lengthy illness at Carcross on July 11, 1916. He was roughly 60 years old.

George Carmack died in Vancouver on June 5, 1922.

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See related articles about George Carmack, Skookum Jim, Robert Henderson and Patricia Ellis' *Discovery of Gold in the Klondike*.