

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DAWJ-2  
The Yukon I:  
Last Blank Spot on the Map

P.O. Box 2723,  
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Yukon, Canada.

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Dear Mr. Nolte:

"I am the land that listens, I am the land that broods."

Robert Service was not all doggerel. He could write flowing verse and while it might be a trifle over-ripe, it conveyed an impression of the Yukon which no one else has touched or equalled.

The Yukon that Service wrote about in the early 1900's had been a century in the making. Canadian coureursde bois had assumed there was land west of the Mackenzie watershed and the Indians knew for certain that there was one more great river before the western sea. By 1840 the outline of the Yukon's coast and boundary mountains was appearing on maps. Franklin had explored the Beaufort Sea and the Russians had poked into the interior of their American possessions far enough to know that there was a vast hinterland between them and the Hudson's Bay Company. But the Russians preferred a bibulous life in their damp settlements on the coast and there was no royal route into the Yukon's watershed for the Canadian fur brigades. The map makers had to pause and the Yukon became the last blank spot on the map of north America.

It took a determined and single minded man to breach this final barrier. In fact he was more demon than man; Sir George Simpson,

Governor in Chief of the Hudson's Bay Company and emperor of the west. For forty years he smashed his way through every boundary and record in the north west. In top hat and frock coat he took an imperial retinue of pipers, buglers, voyageurs and factors into the bush and pursued his magnificent scheme of an empire from Mexico to the Bering Sea. He had inherited the work from the highlanders of the North West Company and he succeeded where they had failed. The Yukon had been too far from Montreal or even Fort Chipweyan for the annual fur brigades. For ten years Simpson built a series of posts and forts deeper into the north and west always aiming towards the blank spot on the map between the Fraser watershed and the Beaufort Sea. In 1834 he sent John McLeod up the Liard from Fort Simpson on the Mackenzie River. McLeod discovered Dease Lake about 100 miles south of the Yukon's border, but the Liard route was hell and the McLeod's post on the lake failed.

Simpson then sent another man, Robert Campbell, who had never turned back from anything. Campbell began by retracing McLeod's Liard route to Dease Lake. He reached it in 1838, went on to the Pacific coast and had an experience there which he was indiscrete enough to record in his diary. He met a "remarkable woman" the chieftainess of the Nahanies. Campbell says "unfortunately we had no proper interpreter, so that our conversation was very limited." But he stayed to talk all winter, perhaps to improve communication, and did not return eastward to the Mackenzie valley until the next year. Sir George was pleased but his letter to Campbell of the 16th June, 1839 made no mention of the lady. It contained however, a definite order to get on with the job "to push our discoveries in the country situated on the Peel and Colville Rivers..."

He adds as an afterthought that, "I am quite sure you will distinguish as much in that quarter as you have latterly done...." Campbell did go on to discover a lot of real estate, but thereafter his diary is silent about Indian ladies of any rank. In 1840 he followed the Liard River west and north and sometime in May he reached the new world which was to be called the Yukon. In September six men, who followed him up the Liard, drowned when the river tore their canoe apart.

Sir George in his annual letter to Campbell in 1841 is complimentary but one gets the impression that he thinks Campbell's near fatal bout with starvation during his first Yukon winter is hilarious. He tells him to push on and then casually twists the knife a little. "While at Stikine about a month ago, I heard of your old friend the Nahany Princess, who assisted you in your distress... 3 years ago... She spoke of you in terms of high commendation." After reading that, Campbell fled further north in the Yukon. He explored, built a fort, (now the oldest settlement in the Yukon, Fort Selkirk), stuck his nose into Russian territory and spent the next ten years having cold baths. He enjoyed the luxury (his word) of a morning dip in the Pelly: "...our cook would knock at my door to tell me the hole was made in the ice ready for me. I would then run down with a blanket round me, dip into the hole, out again, and back to the house, my hair often being frozen stiff before I got there.... no one who has not tried it can have any idea of the exhilarating glow produced....by this hydropathic treatment." It may also have been a sovereign remedy for old memories.

In 1852 the Chilkat Indians mercifully decided to put an end to Campbell's cold baths. By this time he was living in Fort Selkirk on the banks of the Yukon. The Chilkats chose a day when he was on the

other side of the river making hay. By the time Campbell heard the ruckus and got back to the Fort the place was chaos and confusion. What made it worse was that one of the Indian wives in Campbell's party decided that the moment was propitious for bringing forth increase. In the middle of the uproar the great man took all in his stride, ordered everyone afloat and led the escape back to Fort Simpson, 900 miles away; mother and child doing well. And then Campbell put on his snowshoes and walked from Fort Simpson, North West Territories to St. Paul, Minnesota ! (Actually you often trot on snowshoes. Campbell undoubtedly ran.) The distance between Fort Simpson and St. Paul would be 1,700 miles for a crow. For Campbell it was almost twice as far. His diary of the trek is cryptic and only half is legible. You can read however, that it was "slow going", his cough was "bad", and he was "very unwell". He never came back to the Yukon. But his fame is that he made all subsequent Yukon history seem like anti-climax.

After Campbell's winter walk of 1853 there was a quiet interval of almost twenty-five years in the Yukon's history. Campbell got married. Presumably the north west no longer held any charms for him. Sir George Simpson slowly petered out and the Honourable Company lost interest in working in a part of the world where their forts were burnt. Times were changing, too. There was now something else in north America besides fur to attract the argonauts. It was gold. From 1849 the trail led north from California through the valleys of a dozen continental watersheds. There was a lot of ground to cover and a dozen Eldorados on the way. The Fraser valley, the Cariboo, Juneau, Omineca, Stewart and Atlin, each a step north towards the Klondike valley, the greatest of them all.

The first prospectors started to seep into the Territory after 1873. One or two went down the Mackenzie and then westward across the divide into the northern part of the Yukon. This was a journey which might take years. A few came from the Bering Sea, up the Yukon River. The current made it tough slugging and if you came by boat there might be only three months to duck in and out of the interior before the ice caught you. Others came up the Pacific coast to try to get at the underbelly of the Yukon through the newly acquired American Territory of Alaska. At the top end of the Lynn Canal on the Panhandle were two narrow passes through the Coast Range. Both these led up the interior plateau of the southern Yukon only sixty miles north. For virgin bush, the passes were not monstrous obstacles and with sweat and a strong back a man could get through from salt water to the south shore of Lake Bennett in British Columbia in a week or so, provided he tried it in the summer. There was, however, one problem. The Chilkat Indians lived astride these two passes. They were tough customers, proud, fierce and quite prepared to keep everyone else out of the Yukon, their private domain for centuries. It was the Chilkats who had sent Campbell on his way and who had defied the Hudson's Bay Company and Sir George Simpson. History books call them brutal, cunning and murderous. In retrospect, this probably means that they did not hesitate to kill any white man who tried to cut in on their trade and livelihood. They finally gave way to machine guns and from 1880 onwards a few men each year got through the Chilcoot and White Passes with their scalps intact. From Lake Bennett at the headwaters of the Yukon River they could sail or drift 2,000 miles through the interior of the Yukon and Alaska.

Traders came up river by sternwheeler from the Bering Sea to meet the prospectors who were coming down river. They did the business in furs which the Hudson's Bay Company had forsaken forty years previously and they sold bacon, beans and Perry Davis' Pain Killer to the few placer miners who sifted the sand and gravel on the Yukon's watershed. The Pain Killer was alcoholic comfort to a lonely prospector and it wouldn't congeal in anything milder than sixty below. When it did, men stayed indoors because the air then could freeze lung tissue as well as fingers and toes.

The miners found gold. In 1886 there was a rush to the Fortymile in Canada, now just north of Dawson City on the Yukon. A thousand men milled in and out of the town for six years. As a find, the gold at Fortymile was no great shakes but it did bring together in one settlement the majority of prospectors, traders and drifters who had filtered into the Yukon in the previous decade. This concentration of people, many of whom were American, within the borders of Canada, made Ottawa flinch. The philosophy and techniques of settlement in the Canadian west differed profoundly from the free-for-all which the Americans were indulging in below the border. Ottawa, despite two serious lapses in 1870 and 1885 with Louis Riel, enforced high standards of justice and civilization on the western plains and in the Rockies. Selling whisky to the Indians in the Canadian west was probably a deadlier sin than horse-stealing and after the arrival of the North West Mounted Police in 1874 both shortcomings became rare. Lynchings, gun fights, Indian raids, robbery, massacre and kangaroo courts wilted away quietly or were never given a chance to become fashionable. The six-shooter was not a badge of distinction and it had no place in the Criminal

Code of Canada. If the same peace had been enforced south of the border, it is moving to think how television might have turned out.

Fortymile did not conform to the Canadian pattern of settlement. No one minded that life was bizarre and a trifle seamy, but when the miners started to make their own laws and administer "justice" the time had come for the Mounties to put in an appearance. Besides, the residents weren't paying either taxes or duties rightfully owing to Victoria Regina. If a little application of righteousness could be made to pay so much the better. Ottawa came north. In 1894 they sent Inspector Constantine of the North West Mounted Police to Fortymile. Frontier styles went out of fashion quickly. The next spring there was an exodus from Fortymile back over the international boundary to Circle City in Alaska. The flagpole there had a yard-arm on it for hangings. It was probably never used, because Circle was destined to have a short life.

Who changed the course of history in the Yukon? The argument will never be settled which is probably a good thing. The controversy will go on over shots and draughts so long as there is a bar left in the country and two men to prop it up. Robert Henderson, a Bluenoser from Nova Scotia, had a hunch about Rabbit Creek, a twenty mile stream which flowed into the Klondike River. He advised George Carmack to have a look at it. Carmack packed up through the muskeg from the Klondike River with Skookum Jim and Tagish Charley. These three men were bosom pals but they subsequently fell out over the argument. Carmack said he was the first to see the stuff. Skookum Jim claimed that he washed the first gold out of the bottom of his dish pan. The date was

the 17th August, 1896 and the gold there was worth millions. Rabbit Creek was renamed Bonanza. Things were never the same again.

Was the Klondike Gold Rush a disaster for the Yukon ? Probably not, but it certainly was a mixed blessing. By 1898 the word "Klondike" must have been heard and known in every city in the world. Tens of thousands of people started out on the journey. By 1899 Dawson City saw 40,000 of them and several thousand more actually got in to the Yukon by 1900. Dawson City was the largest town in Canada west of Winnipeg. A railway from tidewater was built 110 miles into the Yukon within eighteen months over a route that makes the C.P.R. through the Rockies look like child's play. Dozens of river boats freighted goods and passengers along the 2,000 miles of the Yukon River between Bennett Lake and the Bering Sea, and an armada of little boats took the Sourdoughs from the Chilcoot Pass to the Klondike. Towns, villages, trading posts, mines, sawmills, farms, Boards of Trade, stage coaches, steam engines, the I.O.D.E., and amateur theatricals all flourished on the landscape. The place was on the verge of becoming a Province, Canada was going to fulfil her destiny as the great northern power and the gold from the Klondike would steady the boom-and-bust economy of the western world. The Yukon would no longer be Service's brooding, quiet wilderness.

The summer of 1898 was the crescendo. Twelve months later the slack set in. It was slow decay because the creeks of the Klondike continued to produce. Over \$250 million worth of gold was mined between 1897 and 1950 and even today the huge, cumbersome dredges sift out a million dollars worth of the fine gold every year which the sourdoughs could not capture in their clumsy sluice boxes. The money, however, did not stay in the Yukon and, even though there were jobs to be had



working for the magnates, most of the sourdoughs did not fancy being on someone else's payroll.

The government publications of the day make interesting reading. It is no slander to call them simple and delightful propaganda. In 1909 the Dominion Department of the Interior published this sort of literature:

"Attracted by the possibilities of making their fortunes these sturdy pioneers manifest a courage equal, if not superior, to that of the soldier on the field of battle. They invade the fastnesses of nature, and with an untiring energy and an unconquerable will, they overcome the natural barriers which seem to guard the precious metal with such frigid jealousy. The simple fare and strenuous exercise enable them to endure occasional privation and hardships, while the rifle furnishes them with fresh meat from the vast herds of moose and caribou that roam over the Yukon plateau. Apart, however, from the economic phase of the prospector's life, there is a peculiar attraction in the solitary life of the wilderness. Remote from the restraints and conventionalities of civilization, they enjoy the freedom of solitude and the simple life of the forest. Prospecting in summer and trapping and hunting in winter, they are self-confident and independent. Their discoveries open up opportunities for the investment of capital and the employment of labour, while the merchant, the professional man and the artisan share in the profits of their industry."

"The trails leading from Dawson to the different creeks are comparatively level, and by the middle of January are in splendid condition for sleighing. Wrapped in furs and seated behind spanking teams, many of the citizens of Dawson avail themselves of this exhilarating form of enjoyment."

"As is common in all northern latitudes, the display of the Aurora Borealis is, at times during the winter nights, magnificent. For a moment a flickering light may be seen at some distant point in the sky, then with the speed of a javelin flying from the hand of Achilles, there flashes across the sky a streak of light, the end of which is lost on the opposite horizon. There is an apparent twitching of the phenomenon, and in a few seconds waves of light radiate in all directions. Vivid flashes overspread the sky, as if 'ethereal radiance' were escaping from Prometheus' reed."

All in all, this was a pretty rich literary diet and no doubt Ernest Gowers subsequently had a hand in stifling these bureaucratic muses. As late as 1928, however another official scribe from Ottawa was still in full flight:

"We may expect a land which feeds the imagination and fancy with nightly displays of the Aurora Borealis to mother a race of men who will find pleasure and inspiration in the phenomena of Nature and the northern "sea that bares her bosom to the moon". The Arctic coast of Canada may yet produce poets who

"Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea  
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn."

Such stuff would not get by the departmental censors today but is this trend so praiseworthy? A little enthusiasm and a few literary allusions here and there might improve today's slick official handouts.

The Yukon was premature. The First World War was the end of the dreams and the Klondike died along with the rest of the nineteenth century. In 1914 the Territory raised its own battalion for the Canadian Expeditionary Force and they became the most decorated unit in the Canadian Corps. Sixty percent received medals but the few who survived did not come back to the Klondike.

By 1919 the Territory had assumed the shape it was to have until 1943. One large company dredged the Klondike Creeks around Dawson. The railway ran from Skagway in Alaska to Whitehorse and from there freight was hauled by steamers to Dawson for four months out of twelve. You could travel to Dawson the rest of the year by horse or tractor-train but it was slow going and no one took the trip for pleasure. Men prospected for high-grade ore, a mine would open and another one close, the Indians trapped and the white men worked for each other. The population steadied at about 4,000. Citizens joined the International Highway Association and passed resolutions about a road to Vancouver or Edmonton.

There were not enough men in 1939 to raise a battalion and too few to protect the place from the American invasion of 1942 ! This was a spectacular event, nothing less than a second cataclysm in the same proportions as the Gold Rush. Christmas 1941 in Whitehorse was celebrated in a sedate little town of 350. By June 1942, 30,000 American troops were stationed in and around the place. Liquor revenue to the Territorial government would have been more fabulous than the takings from Eldorado and Bonanza Creeks in 1898, but there was no liquor left over from the war effort. The ration was one bottle a month and no one could get rich or drunk on that. The Yukon had missed another chance for easy money.

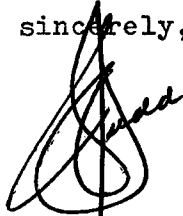
The Americans stood the country pretty well and they worked fast, (probably egged on by the mosquitoes). Within nine months they built 1500 miles of new road from Dawson Creek, British Columbia to Fairbanks, Alaska. The Alaska highway still suffers from the blitzkreig techniques used in its construction but by anyone's standards its building was nothing less than an epic.

The effects on the Yukon were permanent. The highway was taken over by the Royal Canadian Engineers in 1945 and thereafter opened to public use. The sea route, up the inland passage of the Panhandle from Vancouver was no longer the only way in or out. A man could drive or drift north. Freight could be moved to and from any part of the nation on four wheels. The Canadian government began construction of another 2,000 miles of road in the Territory.

Within five years, the rivers, the steamboats and the old settlements were obsolete. We began to live the life of the highways.

The land that Service knew, and which had been quiet for half a century after him, was changing.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Judd". The signature is highly stylized and somewhat illegible due to its cursive and overlapping nature.

David A. W. Judd

Received in New York June 20, 1966.