

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DAWJ-3
Yukon II:
Rivers to Roads

P.O. Box 2723,
Whitehorse,
Yukon, Canada.

July 30th, 1966.

Richard H. Nolte, Esq.,
Executive Director,
Institute of Current World Affairs,
366 Madison Avenue,
New York, N.Y. 10017,
U.S.A.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Yukon has its own holiday; Discovery Day, 17th August, the anniversary of the gold strike in the Klondike Valley. In the long run, we may have more cause to celebrate the 20th November, 1942. That was the day the Alaska Highway was opened at a short ceremony a few yards from Alex Fisher's cabin on Kluane Lake.

The Highway is our link with the outside, a legacy to us and Alaska from the Pacific War. Its effect on that conflict is debatable but its influence here has been profound. In this newsletter I am going to write about Yukon before the roads came and in the next letter describe how the Territory lives in 1966. This transition from rivers to roads has changed our life fundamentally. What has happened here may be a part of a pattern found in some other regions of the middle north.

ROUTES TO THE KLONDIKE

It was water more than gold which shaped us in the early days. Yukon was never a place for the prairie schooner or the Red River cart. Open country is rare here. Hills and mountains dominate the landscape and the bush is sometimes too thick to put one foot in front of the other. Where the trees stop either the mountains or muskeg take over. The only paths were prehistoric game walks or a few tote trails along a river bank where a man had to line a canoe upstream through fast water.

The rivers were the roads. The Indians lived, travelled, traded and hunted on them. The first white man used them in 1842 to reach the Territory and for over 100 years they remained our principal method of transport, long after even Henry Ford.

It was also the water which brought the gold. Prospectors in the nineteenth century looked for placer deposits; gold which had been eroded from its lode and deposited in streambeds by running water and gravity. When it was found in nuggets or coarse grains this loose gold could be extracted by a one-man operation. It needed no complicated processing or refining, no mills, no extensive labour force and no sophisticated transport. In 1898 it was worth \$16.50 an ounce. A man could

pan a fortune and carry it out on his back. He needed no marketing organization to sell his product.

The rivers were a great endowment for Alaska and Yukon. The Yukon itself is north America's fifth largest river. It drains 330,000 square miles of country. It can be navigated from source to mouth and along most of its tributaries for more than 3,000 miles. This fact was generally known in 1897 when tens of thousands of people were asking themselves how they could reach that small tributary of the Yukon called the Klondike. In the next two years 100,000 men and women set out for the Yukon watershed. Most of them must have been convinced before they left home that the journey by sea or land to Yukon water was straightforward and could be accomplished with ease and even in luxury. Travelling to the junction of the Klondike and Yukon rivers was in fact relatively easy for a seasoned backwoodsman once he was afloat on Yukon water. But few Klondikers realized how remote the huge watershed was from even the fringes of nineteenth century settlement or how great the obstacles were which had to be crossed.

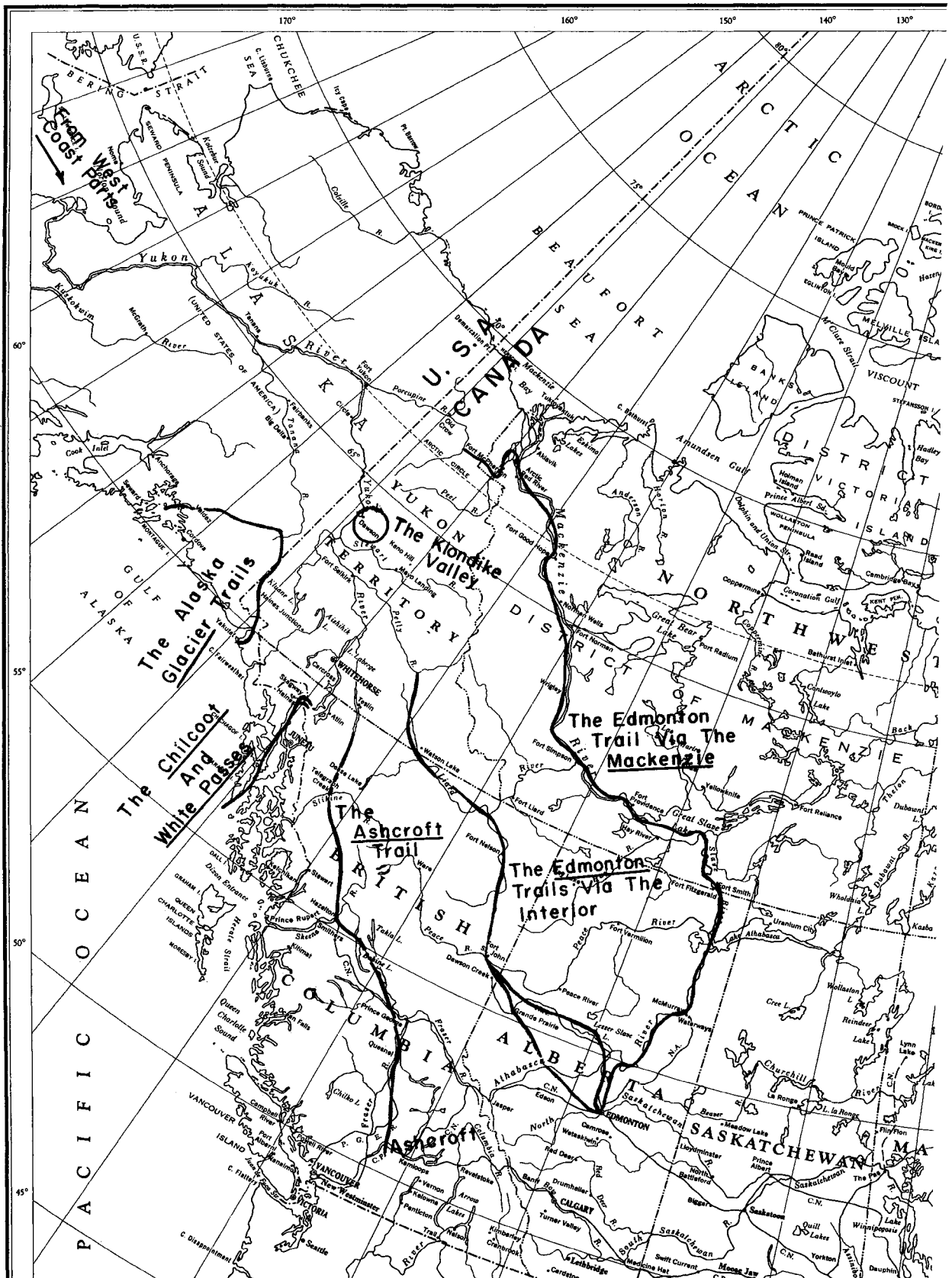
The rush to the Klondike developed into a great odyssey and a massive mistake. There is no precise figure of the number who died. At least two thousand people lost their lives on the trails. Many more must have shortened their allotted three score and ten by the time they returned home. The casualties would have been twice as high had it not been for the rigid standards of equipment and outfit enforced by the Canadian police on Yukon borders and for the numerous relief expeditions.

When the stampede was over this mass of humanity, driven by greed and adventure, sustained by gall and courage had proven how not to get to Yukon. This is the verdict of hindsight, without malice or condescension. It can be only a tribute to those who took the wrong roads and yet who made it, or who died trying. They changed the map of the north-west and established a pattern of settlement and a way of life which was to exist until the highways came north.

It would be an interesting exercise to try to compile a list of all the nationalities who reached the Klondike and the routes they came by. An accurate answer might take two years of steady plodding and research. My own reckoning after a week's reading is that there were at least seventeen main assaults to reach Yukon water. I would not dare to catalogue who came and would hesitate to cross off even Kalahari bushmen from the list of Klondike debutants of 1898. A description of the seventeen routes would be too much clutter for a newsletter. They can be reduced to a compact five.

1. The most westerly, and perhaps the most logical one to those who looked at a map, was up the Yukon from its mouth near St. Michael on the Bering Sea. In theory it was the one way to the Klondike which required no walking; three thousand miles from Seattle by sea to the Yukon delta and another seventeen hundred miles upstream to Dawson City. It was probably described as a piece of cake or a scenic cruise. It did not turn out that way. The first party were 314 days out of Seattle

ROUTES TO THE YUKON WATERSHED 1897-99



before they landed on Front Street in Dawson. The Yukon, like many northern rivers, is monstrously deceptive. At high water it runs at a fast clip, often too fast for a flat bottomed steamer. At low water, perhaps only three weeks later it can be too shallow for the same vessel and each year these shallows will move. If you have to take time to discover the new course you probably will be on the river for freeze up early in October. This is what happened to the cruise of 1897. The winter of 1897-98 produced mutinies, lynchings, disputes and roaring discontent on the banks of the Yukon but at least practically all of the stranded passengers lived through the ordeal.

2. The glacier routes were a different story. Soapy Smith of Skagway must get top honours as the premier gangster of the gold rush. His boys rubbed out so many budding Sourdoughs (i) that people lost count. It may have been fifty, it may have been more but these figures are paltry beside the hundreds of men and women who died because they believed the pamphleteers and spokesmen of the ubiquitous Chambers of Commerce and shipping companies. There were 4,000 people who were convinced they could reach the lower Yukon river by walking north over the Alaska glaciers from Anchorage, Valdez and Yakutak. Today, on the Canadian side of these St. Elias glaciers a man must have a licence from the government to go to the region. His credentials, his alpine training, his equipment and supplies are all scrutinized and no one is allowed in who does not have an expert relief party in the area. He is flown in by a skilled glacier pilot and a joint Canadian-American organization count the days until he returns. Four words describe the experience of those who tried it in 1897; snowblindness, starvation, madness and death. This was the fate of forty-one members of just one party of a hundred. Fortunately most of the 4,000 were licked before they started.

3. Edmonton has an interesting record. It was a one-horse town in 1897 but its merchants were as slick as any in Seattle or Vancouver. There were two routes advertised both starting out from that city. One was the old fur trade route, north on the Peace, Athabasca and the Slave to Great Slave Lake. From there you crossed Great Slave Lake into the Mackenzie River, which followed the divide northward to the Arctic ocean. The trick was to get across that divide into the Yukon's watershed. A few actually did but it took two years and one winter camp near the Arctic Circle to cover the 2,500 miles. The second Edmonton route, which was only a line on the map, struck out due west across the Rockies to the Peace River. From the Peace you could get into the Liard River, work your way upstream and portage over into the Pelly River which was a part of the Yukon

(i) The '98'ers used fermented flour and water for leavening bread because yeast could not stand the cold. Anyone who has spent a winter on the Yukon's watershed merits the title.

watershed. The trip had been made by the professional fur explorers of the Hudson's Bay Company in the 1830's and it was a mere 1,700 miles. The score for both routes? About 2,000 started out. Probably about a hundred made it. Not all of the others died.

The North West Mounted Police (ii) decided that someone must try to pick up the pieces. In September, 1897 they sent a patrol under Inspector Moodie west over the mountains to the Peace River-Liard route. These men were disciplined professionals and they knew their way in bush country. It took them fourteen months to travel the 1,300 miles between Edmonton and Fort Selkirk in Yukon. One of their guides went crazy and disappeared on the way.

4. The fourth route had a pedigree. It was called the Ashcroft trail after the village at its southern end about 125 miles north east of Vancouver. In a straight line it ran 1,000 miles north through the mountain jungle of British Columbia to the south shore of Teslin Lake, one of the sources of the Yukon watershed. This was the route of the Russian-American Telegraph line of 1865. It had been surveyed and in parts wire had been strung. In 1867 the "Great Eastern" laid the Atlantic cable and the overland telegraph to Europe was abandoned. Twenty years later this swath through the bush, or what was left of it, was proposed as a grand highway north. In 1966 there are still some 600 miles of this country which remain desolate and remote. In 1897 suicides, accidents and starvation were fairly common but the survival rate was probably not too bad. There were enough Indians and remote staging posts to keep the trekkers alive if not sane or fit. Fifteen hundred men left Ashcroft. Six made it to the Klondike.

Two side routes led into the Ashcroft trail from the sea. The southern one came up from Wrangell in Alaska, following the Stikine River joining the Ashcroft trail at Telegraph Creek in British Columbia. The northern feeder route was along the Taku valley from Juneau. It met the Ashcroft trail a few miles below Teslin Lake. William Ogilvie (iii) had reconnoitered the Taku valley in 1894 on orders from Ottawa. He says:

"The most gruelling labour got us to the summit of the interior plateau, a micrometer survey of the line of march being made as we went. The most rigid search revealed no practicable wagon road, nothing more than what had been explained to me by the miners I saw who had gone over the route.... I left the town in December weighing one hundred and ninety-six pounds, and returned

-
- (ii) From 1873 to 1903 the Force was known as the North West Mounted Police; in 1904 the prefix "Royal" was added. In 1920 the name was changed to Royal Canadian Mounted Police.
- (iii) The Canadian who surveyed the Alaska-Yukon border in the 1880's and 1890's. He was appointed first Commissioner of Yukon in 1898.

tanned by the sun and wind to a bronze hue, and reduced in weight to one hundred and seventy-two. Not many of my friends there recognized me at first sight."

5. These four routes between the Alaska glaciers on the west and the Mackenzie River on the east were only sideshowsto the great assault on the two passes north of Skagway. It was through these that tens of thousands of argonauts struggled to the Klondike from 1897 to 1900. The White Pass lies north-east of Skagway through fifty miles of winding cliffs and mountains. The entrance to the Chilkoot Pass is about ten miles north-west of Skagway at the head of Dyea Inlet. Both passes run parallel to each other through the coastal mountains of the Panhandle and meet at Lake Bennett, British Columbia, on the headwaters of the Yukon River. From there it is 500 miles by water to Dawson City. It sounded easy in 1897 but the trek across these passes turned out to be the great epic of the Gold Rush. Little that happened around Dawson City and the Klondike Valley matched the terrible effort of crossing the passes north of Skagway.

The way to Skagway was by sea from San Francisco, Seattle, Vancouver and Victoria. Prior to 1896 there were probably one or two scheduled steamer runs to Alaska from the United States but none went near Skagway. By 1898 there were something like 100 ships sailing north, all overloaded and most navigating in water which their crews had never seen. The inland passage is picturesque, but it must be one of the most dangerous pieces of coastal water in the world. There are records of eight sinkings in the first year, all of them caused by overloading, antiquated equipment, negligence or ignorance. Vessels which were often antiques would carry five times their normal load and were jammed with livestock, horses, dogs, dynamite and heaped with paraphernalia for the trail to Dawson. Many Sourdoughs' diaries on this route begin with a record of the misery, confusion and danger of the trip to Skagway.

The next menace en route was Skagway. Sam Steele, the Superintendent of the N.W.M.P. in Yukon had had twenty-two years of harsh experience on the Prairies as a policeman when he made his way to his new post in 1898. He said that Skagway -

"is the roughest place in the world. Gambling hells, dancehalls and variety theatres are in full swing. 'Soapy' Smith, with his gang of one hundred and fifty ruffians, runs the town and does what he pleases. Almost the only people safe are the members of the Force. Robbery and murder occur daily. People come here with money and, next morning, haven't the price of a meal. Shots are exchanged on the streets in broad daylight. At night the crash of bands and the shouts of 'Murder!' mingle with the cracked voices of singers in the variety halls...."

You had to run this gauntlet before getting on the trail. It was then sixty miles to Lake Bennett on the far side of the mountains but it took a lucky man twelve weeks to reach it. The Mounties would let no one into Canada without 2,000 lbs. of food and gear. Famine was always just around the corner. This weight had to be packed over the passes. Three thousand horses died in the White Pass during the winter of 1897-98. Men took over the task, retracing their steps day after day. Seventy feet of snow fell that winter, and the temperature was often fifty below on the inland side. Twenty-two thousand men made the trip by Spring.

They built their boats at Lake Bennett from lumber whip-sawed by hand and they caulked the seams with their winter underwear. Early in June of 1898 the ice went out and the invasion started.

Sam Steele led the armada down to Dawson. He allowed no one to go through Miles Canyon without a pilot. Jack London earned his living here for a summer steering boats down the white water. Squaw Rapids, the Thirty Mile, Five Fingers and the Rink Rapids were all treacherous water and at each place the Mounties kept a watch. There were wrecks but few drownings. More than 7,000 boats converged on Dawson by the end of June and all summer and into the fall of 1899 thousands more straggled in.

The odyssey was over. The gold creeks had already been staked in the winter of '97. Perhaps there is nothing to equal this story of courage and nonsense since the Children's Crusade.

THE BY-PRODUCTS

Nothing that happened around Dawson City or the Klondike Valley ever equalled the Rush itself. It was the getting there which made the Klondike gold strike unique. The real significance of the whole event is found in the history of the trails. The results of this incredible migration are still felt in Yukon today. What are they ?

The word "Yukon" still carries the heavy reputation of hardship, agony and disappointment which it earned in those years. Guy Lawrence was one of the '98'ers . He was seventeen years old at the time and he came in with his father, an artist from London. Both of them were middle class, city-bred Englishmen who had led "a very sedentary life." When they wintered on the Stikine trail Lawrence senior spent his time designing and carving a tessellated floor out of northern spruce for their two by four cabin. One of their neighbours was a tenor from D'Oyly Carte in London and another a Syrian medical doctor from New York.

The younger Lawrence spent his life as an operator on the Yukon Telegraph. After forty-five years in the bush he summed up his feelings about the Gold Rush:

"My experience with the North leaves me with the knowledge that it is a great country; badly maligned by the wanton inexperience of thousands who suffered physically without need when they rushed to the Klondike in their lust for gold, ill prepared and without thought."

The Klondike of 1898 was a battle fought against wilderness and human nature. It was heroic but like war, it was foolish. And Yukon still has the reputation of having been a battle-field.

There were other results. The north-west was walked over and inspected in great detail. Everywhere in the wilderness of Yukon and northern British Columbia there are signs and mementoes of men who penetrated into places where we never go now. We are still developing mineral deposits and mines that they earmarked seventy years ago. Pine Point Mines on the south shore of Great Slave Lake, a huge deposit of lead and zinc, was discovered by trekkers on the Edmonton-Mackenzie route. The C.N.R. now runs a railroad 385 miles to the mine which was completed only last year. United Keno Hill Mines at Elsa is the largest silver mine in north America. Frustrated prospectors from the Klondike highgraded this area after 1900. The copper deposits now being developed at Whitehorse by New Imperial Mines and the Japanese are also of '98 vintage. Northern British Columbia at places like Stewart, Cassiar and Atlin was similarly explored. Alaska has the same story to tell.

The trails that were blazed or followed in 1898 predicted a system of overland communication. The route from Edmonton to Fort Nelson and north, where Inspector Moodie's party hacked its way through three hundred miles of bush, was the forerunner of the Alaska Highway. The Stewart-Cassiar road now being built in northwest British Columbia, and the Hart Highway to Prince Rupert run along parts of the Ashcroft trail. There are now highways in Alaska from Anchorage and Valdez to Fairbanks. Barge traffic from Fort McMurray, Alberta to the Mackenzie delta on the Arctic ocean follows the northern Edmonton route. Sir Clifford Sifton, Minister of the Interior in the Dominion Government personally negotiated a railway up the Stikine route from Telegraph Creek to Teslin Lake. A few miles of grade were built in 1898 but the Senate in Ottawa scotched the deal and Telegraph Creek is still back of the beyond today. Someday there will likely be a road or railroad up the Taku or Stikine valleys.

Two other routes into the Yukon were successfully mechanized. In 1899 the White Pass and Yukon Railway was finished between Skagway and Whitehorse. It still runs today along Dead Horse Gulch where those 3,000 horses were worked to death in 1898. Jack Dalton's overland cattle trail from Haines, Alaska is the route of the Haines Highway, an all-weather road from tidewater to the Alaska Highway. There are few traces on any of these routes of the Rush but they are a tribute to the Sourdoughs who blazed the way.

LIFE ON THE RIVERS

For us the most important effect of the Gold Rush was the legacy of river settlements dotted along the Yukon's watershed and the life which went with them. By 1900 there were some 27,000 people left in Yukon living in a series of villages and towns strung out on the river banks. This population had dwindled by 1939 to about 4,000 but most of the old places remained inhabited by at least a few families. A government report for 1926 lists forty-three settlements still functioning with a population for the Territory of 4,157.

Until the roads came people had to live with the seasons. The rivers were free of ice for about five months between June and October. Groceries, mail, dry goods and visitors came with the sternwheelers. It was two days downriver from Whitehorse to Dawson and four days back against the current. By mid October navigation started to close with the first floating ice. Freeze-up came later and then the winter trails spread out over the frozen ground. In the early days winter travel was by sledge with either dogs or horses doing some of the work. By the 1920's the tractor had been introduced. It could pull much greater loads but speed was still at walking pace and the mechanical beast did not have the advantage of four legs to lift itself out of a drift. Passengers paid their way but the management expected them to push when necessary. All in all most people stayed near home after the snow flew. It was a quiet life, but not a soft one.

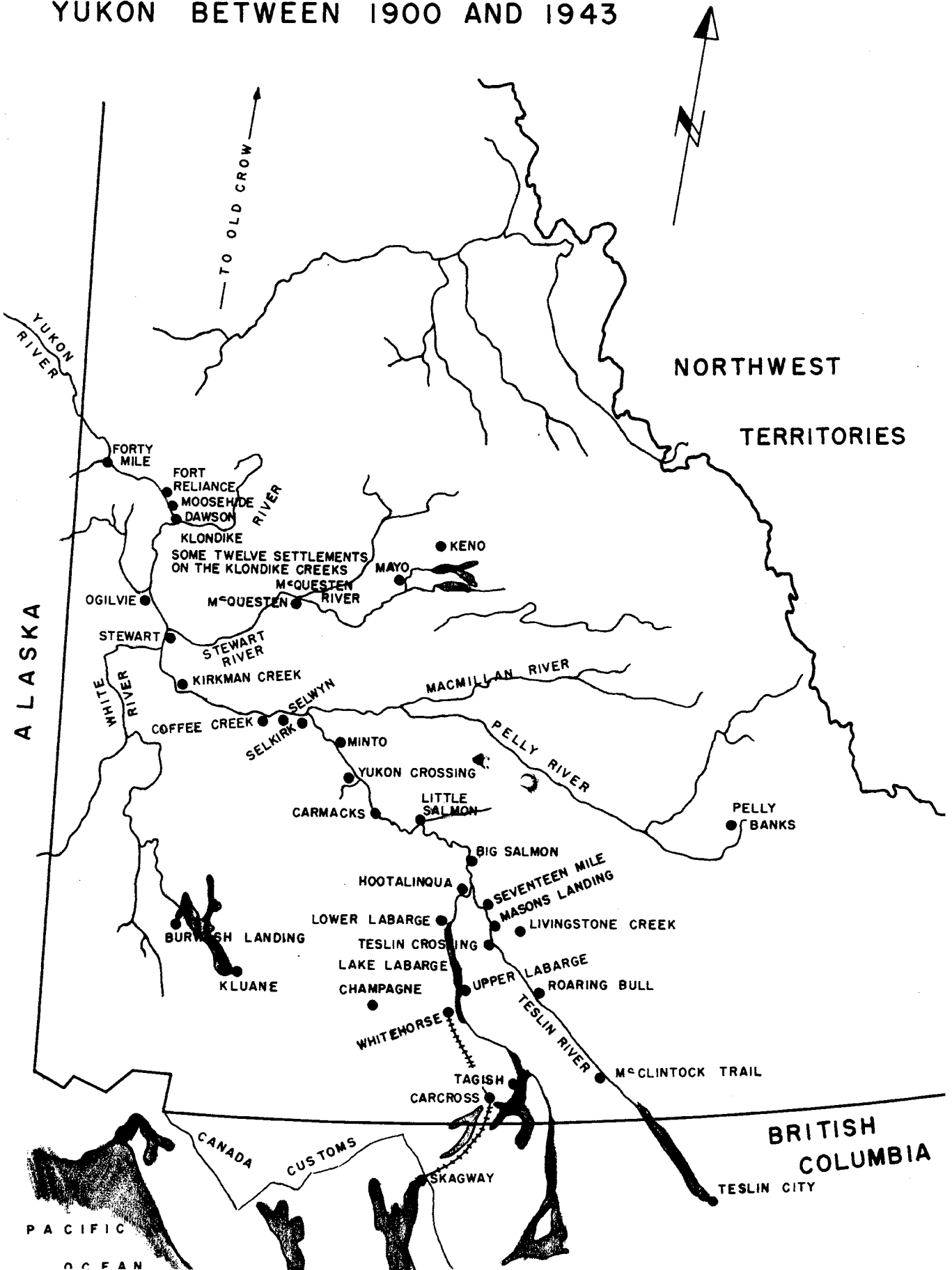
In retrospect it was also a life which might have saved many Indians from grief. The white man did not have the gadgetry to make him as independent from his natural environment as he has today. Most whites used wood for heat and cooking. Cabins, houses, stores and government buildings were log. Fresh food was scarce in the winter. The white man and his wife found out quickly what the bush could provide. Moose, caribou, bear, fish and a variety of berries supplemented store-bought diet and were often essential items for many families who could make only an annual visit to the corner store. Everyone had a kitchen garden and each year the population grew tiddly on fresh rhubarb wine.

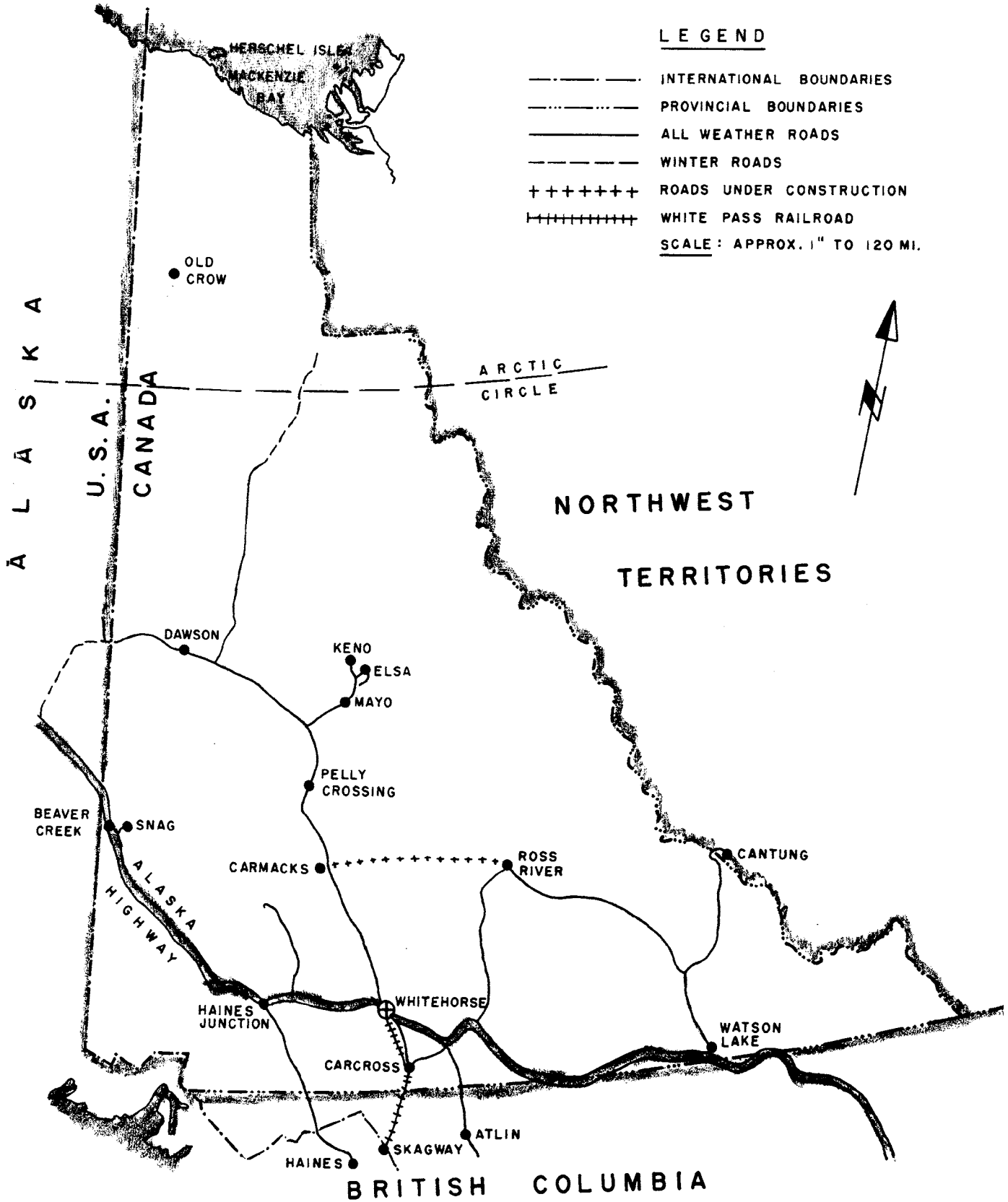
Travel was never posh, never comfortable and sometimes a little tricky. There were model T's in the towns but after driving around the block you had used up most of the available roadway in the Territory. In summer you went by steamboat, canoe or an ancient Johnson "kicker" on the stern of a Mackenzie freighter. In winter it was sleighs or snowshoes.

Warm clothing was essential and Paris designs and Montreal cloth were not always practical. Parkas, mukluks and trail mitts made from local hide and fur were in vogue. Houses were small and in no way pretentious. Entertainment was home-grown. The wonderful men in their flying machines had come to stay but aircraft were still something to be featured at fairs and circuses.

Livelihood came straight from the land with no sophisticated processing, packaging and marketing. Both Indians and whites cut wood and lumber, constructed buildings, worked on the sternwheelers,

YUKON BETWEEN 1900 AND 1943





**ROADS, RAILROADS AND SETTLEMENTS
IN THE YUKON 1966**

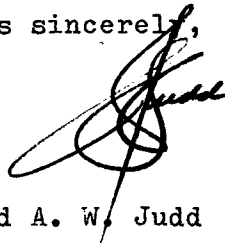
prospected, mined, trapped, fished and hunted. It was an economy which supported the people with little or no assist from Ottawa or elsewhere.

It was not idyllic. Communities were small, isolated, ingrown and occassionally vicious. The social barriers were there. A white man who married an Indian could expect a rough time from the matrons round about. Indians had their place; "the boys are taught carpentry, blacksmithing, etc., and the girls to do general domestic work." But in retrospect it was a life which might have fostered assimilation and integration. The economic gulf between Indian and white was not gigantic. Perhaps an Indian might not have felt beaten before he started. And there was the other vital factor which has vanished today; inter-dependence. The white man needed the bush and the rivers to survive and Indians were masters of both. The two had to walk the same trail together in their search for food, shelter, heat and clothing. When it was sixty below and a man was lost, starving or bleeding from an axe wound, skin colour was remarkably unimportant.

All this has gone. In 1966, with the exception of Old Crow beyond the Arctic Circle, there are only three families, (two white and one Indian) living permanently on the rivers where water is the principal link with the world. The rest of us live on the roads and the roads short-circuit the rivers. We are part of urban north America. We have our outdoor barbecues, rumpus rooms and second cars. And for too many there are only pool halls, pubs and welfare cheques. It never occurred to me before I came to Yukon how many service clubs are named after animals and birds. The menagerie flourishes here and perhaps in part because we derive some subconscious or vicarious experience from them of the bush which is now no longer an integral or vital part of our lives.

This is Progress. It has brought comfort, leisure and affluence. Most people turn it to good use but many are overwhelmed or bewildered by it. Its chief victims here are often the Indians. We no longer live together. They exist for the most part, on the fringes of our society despite the government agencies, programmes, and some goodwill oriented toward their problems and handicaps. For them the roads came too soon.

Yours sincerely,



David A. W. Judd

Received in New York August 5, 1966.