INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DAWJ-4
Yukon III:
Life on the Roads 1966

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

August 27th, 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:

This summer we moved the sternwheeler "Klondike" to her last berth. It took three weeks to drag her 1,000 tons across town from the old shipyards. Eight hundred pounds of Princess soap flakes were used to grease the skids. Now she sits on the west bank of the Yukon in a spanking new park on South Whisky Flats. (When will some home owners' association try changing the name to Riverside Park ?)

The "Klondike" is a fitting memorial not only to the vanished fleet of riverboats but to life in Yukon before the roads came. Her last voyage was in 1958 but she was doomed twelve years before when the Alaska Highway was opened for civilian traffic. From that time on our life changed rapidly.

There are now 16,000 people living in Yukon. About 2,000 are Indian and the rest the usual hodge-podge of Anglo-Saxon, Teuton, Slav and Celt. By Canadian standards the Territory is small, only 207,000 square miles or 5.4% of our national area. The Northwest Territories are six times larger and, for comparison, even Texas has a 60,000 square mile edge on us.

Why are there still people in Yukon sixty years after the Klondike Gold Rush petered out ? A surprising number were born here. In 1901 the population was close to 30,000. By 1931 this had dwindled to about 4,000 but these were the self-reliant who liked it and intended to stay. The Indians, of course, have pride of place but it is noteworthy that there are now a few white families who are into their fifth Yukon generation.

The rest of us have come in from outside since the second world war. First there are the boomers, the skilled tradesmen, cat skinners and tool pushers who arrive with wife, children, widowed mother-in-law, bag, baggage and even kitchen sink, all commodiously housed in a huge aluminium trailer. They scrape Alaska highway dust from their mobile homes and plant pansies around the front door. In a year or two the whole street may hitch up and go to a new hydro project in Quebec but over the years, one by one, families have stayed. The trailer is sold, a new house built in a Whitehorse suburb and the booming days are over.

The civil servant, soldier or policeman on posting from the south usually arrives by car and moves into a government house. Most of them also go away eventually but over the last twenty years some have put down roots. There are dusty army, airforce and R.C.M.P. uniforms hanging in many a Yukon cupboard.

School teachers, engineers, doctors, American tourists (who can't face the thought of a summer weekend at Yosemite again), immigrants, Chinese Canadians with an eye on the expanding market for the world's best cuisine, make up the rest of the post-war Yukoners.

What do we do for a living ? There are, by a recent estimate, 5,200 men and women working full-time. The Dominion government employs some 800 in the various federal departments and agencies which are found in every part of Canada: post office, police, customs and excise, national revenue, public works, transport, military installations, etc. There are another 550 civil servants and teachers who work for the Territorial government. All told, both government payrolls account for about 26% of the workforce here.

Mining is next on the list and is the backbone of our home-grown economy. The largest mine in the Territory is United Keno Hill at Elsa, one of the leading silver producers in the continent. Their production has recently been running at about $10 million a year. This, together with other lode and placer mines and a considerable prospecting industry, employs about 1,100 people; 22% of our wage earners. Oil companies spent $4.7 on exploration in Yukon in 1964. There are no figures available for lode and placer exploration.

In 1965 the value of commercial construction was $1.6 million. This industry employs about 750 people, 14% of the work force. A fair amount of construction goes on in the winter. With new techniques winter weather matters less and less.

Another 13% of the working population provide services ranging from motels to doctors' clinics. There are ten doctors in private practice, three dentists, eight barristers and solicitors, 160 hospital beds, restaurants, accommodation for 2,300 visitors, two newspapers, a TV station, C.B.C. radio, and 170 small businesses in the Territory. All told these services employ about 700 people.

A transportation industry has grown with the roads and railroads. We have 2,000 miles of all-weather gravel road and hundreds of miles of winter roads and summer tote trails. Some 80,000 tons of freight are now hauled on the Alaska highway each year and truckers within the Territory carry 150,000 tons. The railway which runs 110 miles from Whitehorse to tidewater at Skagway in Alaska carries 135,000 tons of goods each year.

The roads and railway have brought tourists and travellers. Seventy to eighty thousand people drive from the south every year either to do business or see the country. Some are destined for Yukon, most are en route to Alaska. The daily milk run on Canadian Pacific Airlines originating in Edmonton and Vancouver carries about 12,000 people a year. Buses run every day to and from Edmonton and Vancouver. The trip takes thirty-six hours. These various transportation industries employ 500 workers, slightly over 9% of the work force.

The merchants do $19 million dollars of retail trade a year. Their firms employ 400 men and women; 7.7% of territorial workers.

Last on the list is the catch-all of "Others." The figure given is 340, 6.5% of those who work. This includes the self-employed; trappers, woodcutters, artists, small ranchers and some who happily still defy all bureaucratic categories.

I have not included military personnel. They are off in a corner by themselves but I would reckon there may be about 900 servicemen and dependents living in the Territory.

What does all this add up to ? Not very much. In the national economy Yukon is not important or even noticeable. We have less population than many Canadian towns, only one mine of any size and our contribution to national mineral production only .5%

The same kind of statements could be made about the rest of the Canadian north and perhaps about much of the global middle north. Why bother to write about it ? Canadians and Russians are compelled to at least notice the middle north if only to acknowledge that it exists because it comprises so much of their national real estate. One third of Canada lies north of the 60° parallel which, incidently, circles near such places as Leningrad and Stockholm. I know too that people who live in the middle north are obsessed with the urge to talk about it because they know how greatly the region is misunderstood.

I believe however, that there are more substantial reasons than these to justify a series of letters of this sort. It seems to me that Yukon in 1966 illustrates two fundamental facts of life about the middle north.

1. Yukon is a place to live. It is a place where people come to stay, raise families and build towns. Most of us are here because we like it. If you make a statement like that "outside" people usually smile (you're from the Ice Worm Chamber of Commerce) or back away (you're dangerously bushed). They forget how portable twentieth century life has become. Whitehorse (pop: 7,000) is a small town too much like thousands of others:

radio, neon lights, TV., pool halls; drycleaners, florist shops, chic restaurants with creditable cellars, disposable diapers, power mowers and supermarkets. We have lost our sense of seasons like everyone else. There are fresh strawberries and tomatoes in winter. Summer seems to begin in February when the local Dairy Queen opens. We are so mechanized that we skate and curl on artificial ice in the winter.

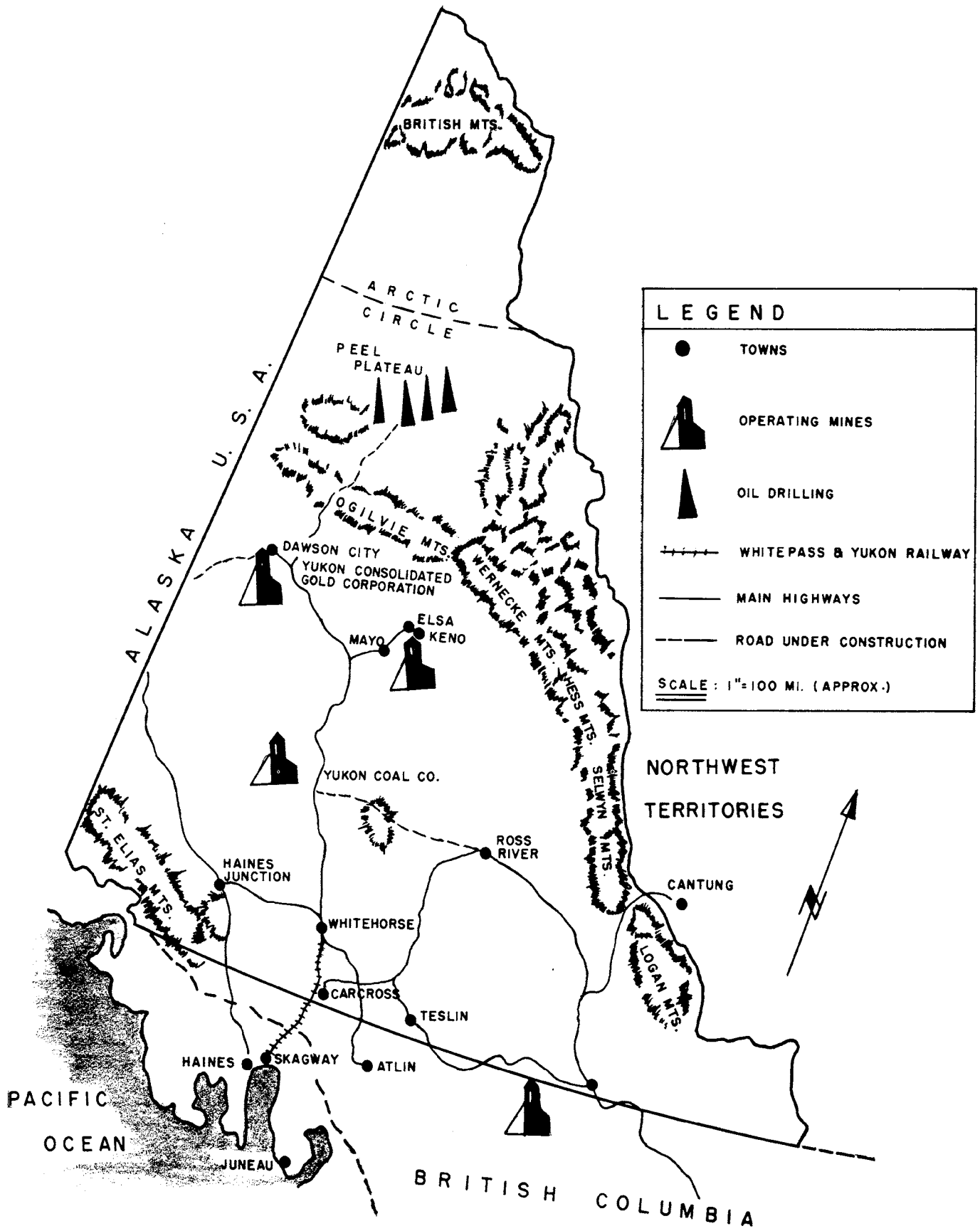
The weather in winter is cold; about the same temperatures as Edmonton, Saskatoon and Winnipeg but without the prairie wind. The winter days are as short as Leningrad's or Oslo's but we have more sunlight because we are sheltered from the direct influence of the sea. Snowfall is light, considerably less than Toronto or Chicago.

There are differences. Whitehorse is not satellite to a metropolis. Edmonton is our closest big city and it is 1,700 miles away. We manufacture our own live theatre, concerts, art shows and black-tie affairs. We are probably more cosmopolitan than most north American towns because we are a capital city and a place where local companies doing business with Japan, Australia or the United States have their headquarters. We appear also to be on the route of the grand tour for Australian nurses, New Zealand school teachers, Italian mountain climbers, Japanese Trade Commissioners and Russian engineers. Our summers are different too; twenty-four hours of daylight for three months and considerably less rain than in most of north America. The sun produces a good tan and temperatures in the seventies. It also provides a living for landscape gardeners. Every year the thermometer goes to the high eighties for a few days but then we think of New York and are thankful.

All this is uncomfortably reminiscent of tourist publicity. But it is important. Until recently, to live in the middle north meant an existence somewhere between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Now we can live off our twentieth century diet and enjoy some open country and privacy to boot.

There are things here which are not spoken of in tourist advertisements; the scenery for instance. Look at the horizon, the immense distances, the grandeur and you'll be awed. If your taste runs purely to English hedgerows or Japanese gardens you'll be appalled. The land is dry and dusty.

THE YUKON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PACIFIC OCEAN
JUNEAU
BRITISH COLUMBIA
LEGEND
TOWNS
OPERATING MINES
OIL DRILLING
WHITEPASS & YUKON RAILWAY
MAIN HIGHWAYS
ROAD UNDER CONSTRUCTION
SCALE : 1"=100 MI. (APPROX.)

Grass has to be cultivated and the soil is often poor. Our Territorial flower is a weed.

Our own ornamentation on the landscape is noteworthy. Northerners are fanatical junk collectors. We venerate the 45 gallon oil drum. Hundreds of thousands of these round metal shrines remain inviolate and indestructable on the landscape. Lavished around them are crankshafts, tractor tires, ax heads, tin cans, broken bottles, odd shoes, and surmounting all, the soggy filagree of Kleenex, last year's weekend newspapers and the gay tinsel of empty TV dinners. The pity is that all this decoration is lost on us. We don't see it.

Statistics say that we have more than our share of alcoholics, petty criminals and chronic welfare cases. These people are often miserable victims of mythology. There is an image of the frontier which still exists everywhere on this continent, the golden west, where land is cheap or free and where law and regulations are skimpy or absent. None of this is true. There has not been free land in Canada for decades and there is none in Yukon. It is not easy to buy land from the Crown. If you say you need a 1,000 acres for breathing space you will be lucky to get three. If you come north with the mistaken idea that there are still homesteaders here you will very likely end up as a squatter. This is no easy fate. The cost of living is about 25% higher than in Edmonton and big government with its multitude of controls is everywhere.

The myth has other more subtle dimensions. There is still the search for Jordan water where the weary southerner can wash himself free of the sins of unpaid debts, deserted families, bankrupt businesses or uncontrolled appetites. We are a land of opportunity but only for those who have a fair measure of gumption, wit and tenacity. This frontier often turns out to be only the end of the road.

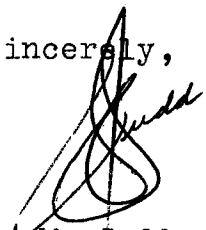
2. The second fact of life is that Yukon is a place to make a living. Until the highways many people here lived at subsistence level. Now our problems are to find the people to do the work. We redesign our school curriculum periodically and change our trade courses virtually every year to try to produce enough graduates for the market place. Government still looms too large in our economy but by comparison we are a flourishing example of free enterprise in the middle north. Our commerce is

based mainly on two foundations; the highways and the mines, and there is potential for growth in both of these not only in Yukon but throughout most of the middle north.

There is a sense of permanence here for the first time. Even if we were to grow little in the next few decades we would be sure of being a functioning integral and up-to-date part of a nation and of a hemisphere. Yukon, and parts of the middle north like it, has joined the twentieth century.

This is not the whole story. Our potential is something else again and deserves a separate letter.

Yours sincerely,



David A. W. Judd

Received in New York September 6, 1966.