

JOURNEY TO SKAGWAY ALASKA

GATEWAY TO THE KLONDIKE GOLDRUSH

BY DENISE SEITH

“Ho! for the Klondike. Stick to the trail and mush on!” Those were words to live by in 1897 and 1898 when more than 100,000 fortune-seekers used Skagway as their “jumping off point” to the goldfields some 600 miles beyond. To gain insight into the extraordinary Klondike Gold Rush that peaked and plummeted within just two short years, a visit to Skagway is a must. No need to stock up on pickaxes and bags of beans and flour beforehand as was required of the first stampeders, but you might want to bring a spirit of adventure and a camera.

Back-dropped by snow-capped mountains, Skagway today (formerly spelled Skaguay or Skagua, as it was known by the Tlingit Indians, meaning “windy place”) is the year-round home to about 920 Alaskans. The small town’s gold rush era architecture and history are well preserved. Six blocks of downtown have been designated as the Klondike Gold Rush National Historic District and are managed by the National Park Service, so there’s a good bit of yesteryear mixed in with modern gift shops and museums. Join a free ranger-led walking tour of the historic district, or pick up a self-guided walking map. It’s easy to explore on foot — just head down Broadway along the rough-hewn boardwalk.

The best place to begin your visit is at the Klondike Gold Rush Visitor Center, housed in the historic White Pass and Yukon Route Railroad Depot at Second and Broadway. Watch the 30-minute film, *Gold Fever: Race to the Klondike* in the auditorium, and then take a look at the exhibits and artifacts on display. Nearby at Third and Broadway is the Mascot Saloon — an authentic saloon museum containing more interesting displays and dioramas. To learn about Skagway’s founder, visit the historic Moore House and Cabin at Fifth and Spring streets. The driftwood-encrusted building on Broadway bearing the letters AB for Arctic Brotherhood dates back to 1899. It once was the first social order established by gold miners, but now it’s the most-photographed place in town. It’s also pretty impressive to note that a few businesses such as Kirmse’s Curios, first opened over a century ago, and are still thriving. Look for their advertisement painted high on the rocks above town.

If you get thirsty for more than knowledge while in Skagway, stop in for a sarsaparilla or other cold beverage at the lively Red Onion Saloon. It used to be a brothel, but now you'll just find good, clean fun. Have a look at the museum on the top floor, or better yet, take a walking tour of the town with a "working girl" and learn about the ladies' very important role in the Klondike Gold Rush, as well as hear a few ghost stories. You are certain to learn a thing or two from the likes of "Madame Lacy Knickers" or "Madam Ella Vagoodtime" or another talented actress turned tour guide!

For an amusing encounter with Skagway's history, board a sunny yellow Skagway Street Car on Second Avenue. The authentic vehicles were created in 1923 for President Warren Harding's visit to Skagway. Since then, tourists wishing to see "all points of interest" (as proclaimed by the advertising painted on the side) hop aboard for a 90-minute narrated tour. While driving in and around town, a costumed guide brings Skagway's wild and lawless past to life. The stories are amazing!

Imagine Skagway in 1898 — a chaotic, unkempt

city. At any given time, 10,000 or so gold rush stampeders lived here in tents and other make-shift structures. Another 1,000 hopeful prospectors passed through every week. Thanks to a few colorful characters — especially notorious con artist and crime boss Jefferson "Soapy" Smith — corruption and gunfights were commonplace. You'll find Soapy's final resting place, and that of Frank Reid, beloved citizen who lost his own life when he killed Soapy, at the Gold Rush Cemetery on the outskirts of the city. You'll also see grave proof of the epidemics that swept through the town because of overcrowded and unsanitary conditions.

Although Skagway is central to the Klondike Gold Rush, the alluring story actually begins in Seattle, Wash. on July 17, 1897. Sailing down from Dawson City in Canada's Yukon Territory, the SS Portland arrived in Seattle with 68 rich miners and nearly two tons of gold on board. Three days earlier, the Excelsior had docked in San Francisco, also carrying miners and tons of gold from St. Michael, Alaska. Word and excitement spread quicker than wildfire. The headlines of every major newspaper across the country, and the world, exclaimed GOLD! STACKS OF YELLOW METAL IN THE KLONDIKE!

Fortuitously, Seattle immediately launched an unprecedented public relations campaign that established the port city as the place to get the "ton of goods" (about 1,000 pounds of food and another 1,000 pounds of gear) required by the Canadian Mounties for admittance into the Klondike. The campaign was ingenious. The majority of the 100,000 gold seekers on




their way north thought of Seattle as the logical start to their expedition, and bought all or most of their supplies here.

It's hard to imagine hauling 400 pounds of flour, 150 pounds of bacon, 125 pounds of beans, plus cookware, clothes and tools, but it was actually a smart mandate for the long trail to the gold. Having a year's worth of food and equipment protected miners from starvation while they waited out bad weather and worked their claims in hope of finding the mother lode. By the spring of 1898, Seattle merchants had sold stampeder's goods worth \$25 million — far more than the value of the gold dug from the Klondike during the same period. "A ton of goods" became a catch phrase for the Klondike Gold Rush — all in hopes of finding a ton of gold!

An excellent place to learn about the frenzy of the "Klondike Outfit Rush" is at the Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park in downtown Seattle. Signage, exhibits and audiovisual programs fully document the exciting story of the stampeder's. You can see demonstrations of early mining equipment here, and park rangers show visitors how to pan for gold. The museum is very well done and part of the broader Klondike Gold Rush International Historical Park that also includes sites in Canada and Alaska.

Wondering why so many men (and women) would eagerly leave the familiar and risk the unknown based on a couple of gold-laden steamships making front page news? The answer is simple — most didn't have anything to lose. U.S. gold reserves plummeted in 1893, the stock market crashed and millions were barely scraping by. More than a downturn, the Panic of '93 was a serious economic crisis. Hundreds of banks failed. Railroads failed. Businesses failed. The discovery of Klondike gold actually brought hope. After several years of depression, it gave men a sense of purpose and adventure — a way to provide for their families and get ahead. Gold was seen as stable and dependable. And, the newspaper hype, such as "Far away land seems lined with gold" and "Cash paid for gold dust" promised quick wealth. Everyone seemed to know someone who knew someone who supposedly found a fortune. The Klondike was a golden opportunity to strike it rich! What these hopeful





prospectors didn't know, though, is that by the time they would finally reach the Klondike (most arrived in late June 1898, two years after gold was first discovered), the richest land would already be claimed and worked out.

Gold was first found in a tributary of the Klondike River, 600 miles from Skagway. On Aug. 16, 1896, American prospector George Carmack, his Tagish Indian wife Kate (Shaaw Tláa), her brother Skookum Jim (Keish) and their nephew Dawson Charlie (Káa Goox) made an amazing discovery quite by chance. Resting by Rabbit Creek, later renamed Bonanza Creek, Carmack noticed a metallic glitter in the shallow water while washing a dishpan. Eureka! The very next day, these fortunate few filed their official claims and before too long, anyone lucky enough to be in the area and hear the good news followed suit. By November of that year, 338 claims had been recorded in the Klondike.

Because it took a year before this wealth of Klondike news reached the outside world, the excited hopefuls down in the Lower 48 states couldn't have known that there wouldn't be much good land left for them to claim. The gold that was mined that first winter in the Klondike wasn't shipped out until the following spring when the navigation season opened. By the time those gold-bearing steamships and jubilant miners made headlines, it was old news along the Yukon River.

Although not fully prepared nor informed, determined gold seekers stampeded out of Seattle, choosing either an all water route to Dawson City, or a combination water and land route. The "rich man's route" sailed from Seattle to St. Michael, Alaska, then up the Yukon River to Dawson. The combination route was much less expensive, therefore, the most popular. Ships sailed from Seattle through the Inside Passage and up the Lynn Canal to the ports of Dyea or Skagway, Alaska. Prospectors could then choose to hike over the mountains from either port town to Lake Bennett, British Columbia. At Lake Bennett, a boat would be needed to continue the remaining 550 miles to the gold fields. Hiking options included the Chilkoot Trail from Dyea, which was shorter but more difficult, or via the White Pass Trail out of Skagway that was about 10 miles longer, but less steep. No matter which route the miners chose, the North West Mounted Police met them at the top and made sure each miner had the requisite ton of supplies before being allowed to mush on into Canada.

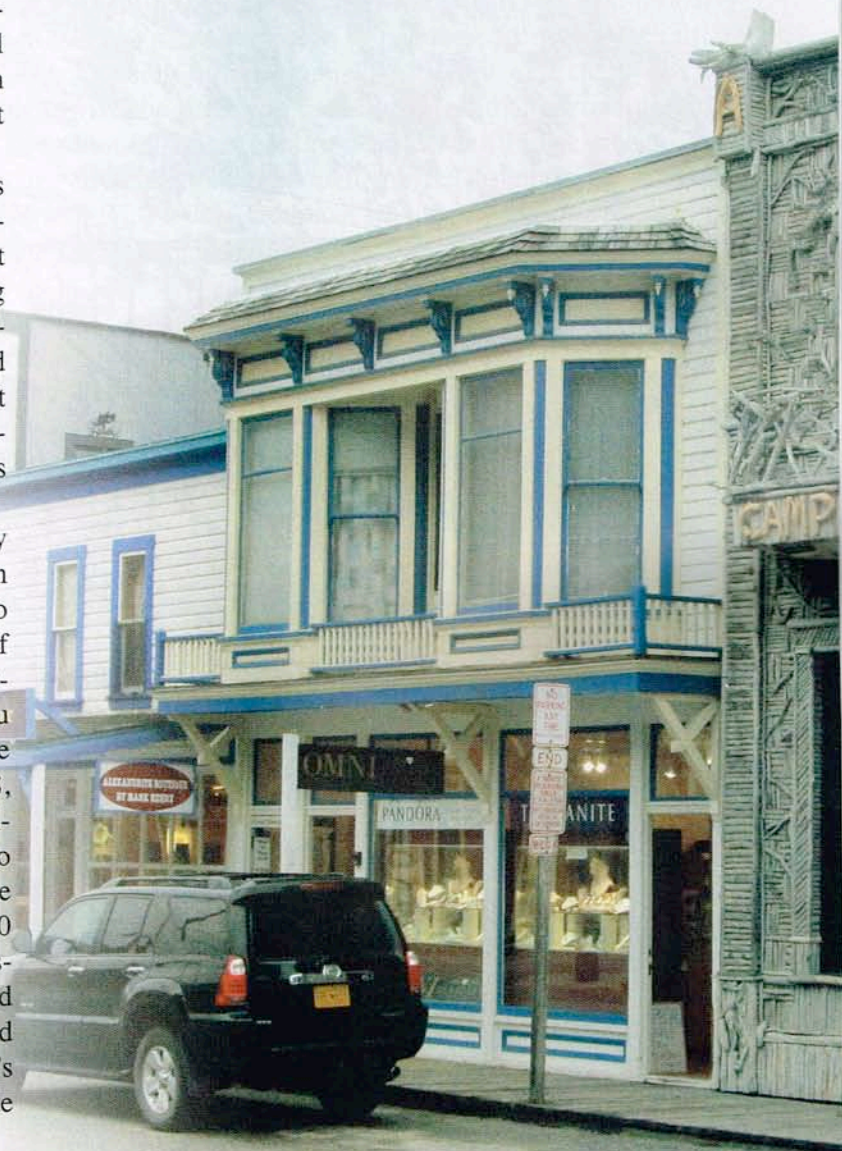
Roughly 30,000 indomitable prospectors chose to battle the 33-mile Chilkoot. The trail was rough, and the weather was harsh. In early April 1898, a storm hit the Chilkoot Pass, triggering an avalanche that killed 60 people. Many turned back, especially when faced

with the formidable frozen “Golden Staircase” at the end. This last long difficult incline is a quarter-mile climb gaining 1,000 vertical feet! To get their load up the ice stairway, prospectors had to repeatedly go up and down it 20 or 30 times, which took about three months! Those with the means hired native Tlingit Indians to help haul their heavy gear. Some used pack-horses and, for a few months, there were even several aerial tramways to help move freight. But, most men couldn’t afford help and muscled it solo, slowly but surely.

Today, the Chilkoot Trail is littered with rusty relics and considered to be the world’s longest outdoor museum. Remnants of wooden buildings and canvas tent cities appear every few miles. It’s tempting to swing a metal detector here, but you can’t. Modern-day hikers challenging the trail must only stay in designated campsites and leave every artifact. There’s nothing left now of the town of Dyea, but at the height of the Klondike Gold Rush, 150 businesses, including 48 hotels and two hospitals, served the masses.

Although gold was never found in the Skagway River Valley, Skagway was a better, deeper port than Dyea, so it earned the reputation as the “Gateway to the Klondike.” Most stampeders “jumped off” here. If miners hadn’t brought along enough supplies from Seattle, this was their last chance to get outfitted. If you didn’t have \$500 to buy your “grubstake” (requisite ton of goods), and were in Skagway after May 1898, you could work for the White Pass & Yukon Railroad Company for \$3 a day. Built to carry miners into the Klondike, the railroad, it was said, employed the most highly educated workforce. Many of the 35,000 recruits had been doctors, lawyers and other professionals before they risked it all and joined the Gold Rush. In fact, some of the former doctors were pulled away from driving rail spikes to assist the railroad’s surgeons in the field. Debris from blasting away granite hillsides caused many, many injuries.

The \$10 million White Pass Yukon Route (WPYR) project got underway in April 1898 and was led by experienced railroad contractor Michael Heney. “Give me enough dynamite and snoose and I’ll build a railroad to Hell,” bragged Heney one night at the St. James Hotel in Skagway. Looking for his next challenge, he was determined to forge a route to Whitehorse in the Yukon Territory. When surveyors insisted that constructing a railroad through solid granite, up steep grades, around cliff-hugging turns and in unimaginable weather conditions couldn’t be done, he built it anyway. Thanks to investors in London, a lot of human muscle power, 450 tons of blasting powder and a pinch of snuff between his cheek and gum, the narrow gauge WPYR was completed in two years, two months, and two days.





Madame Lacy Knickers
Photo by Denise Seith

Unfortunately, it didn't reach Lake Bennet, the beginning of the river and lakes route to Dawson City, until July 1899 — too late to be of much use to the majority of the stampedeers who had reached there on foot a year prior. Alaska cruise ships now bring far more tourist business to the historical railroad than the original gold rush ever did, but a narrated ride on The Scenic Railway of the World is unforgettable.

Before the railroad, an alternative to hiking the "Golden Staircase" was the White Pass Trail from Skagway. Although not as steep as the Chilkoot, it still took miners about a month to lug all their gear about 45 miles up to the White Pass Summit — elevation 2,865 feet. In some places, the path was only two feet wide and a 500-foot drop awaited any animal or miner who made a misstep. A particularly gruesome section of the route, Dead Horse Gulch, was aptly named because during the 1897-1898 winter, 3,000 pack animals died here. Some slipped and fell, but most were literally worked to death. As gold fever set in, hurried miners had no regard for the animals. When one died, they left it to rot, bought another and then another — all in their haste to get to the gold. Residents of Skagway complained about the smell wafting down into the city.

Whether gold seekers trudged the Chilkoot or the White Pass Trail, both converged at Lake Bennett on the border between British Columbia and Yukon, Canada. A large tent city sprang up on its shores, offering all the services of a major city to thousands of fervent adventurers. This is where miners built boats and waited for "break up." Once the river ice melted, they still had to navigate 550 miles down the mighty Yukon River to the gold fields at Dawson City. In late May 1898, the North West Mounted Police counted more than 7,000 boats, rafts, canoes, skiffs — anything that would float — ready to launch. Many men didn't make it to Dawson, though, and drowned in the river rapids.

As you might expect, Dawson City, located at the confluence of the Yukon and Klondike Rivers, boomed with the discovery of nearby gold. Although it might have felt good to weary prospectors to be off the trail, life in crowded Dawson wasn't grand. Many succumbed to dysentery or other diseases. Merchants did well, though. Just like back in Seattle or Skagway, they made a fortune selling over-priced food and equipment. Want a fresh egg? You'll need \$5. Whiskey was \$40 a gallon. Then, as now, prices were determined by supply and demand.

By the time most stampedeers reached Dawson City from Seattle, nearly two years had passed since the local gold discovery. Without good land to work, disillusioned fortune hunters simply sold their gear

in exchange for steamboat fare home. Others heard about another gold discovery in Nome, Alaska and went there. During one week in August 1899, 8,000 people deserted Dawson for the beaches of Nome. Miners undaunted by the slim pickings or strenuous work in the Yukon, stayed put and set about learning how to melt the permafrost soil. Shafts were dug almost down to bedrock to get to the gold-bearing dirt and gravel. That material was then sluiced when the streams were not frozen. Just think how much a modern-day highbanker would have helped the old-timers!

The Klondike Gold Rush statistics are sad, but true. It is estimated that of the 100,000 people who embarked for Dawson City, 40,000 reached it; 20,000 actually worked mining claims, but only 300 made more than \$15,000 in gold, which compared to today's standards would have afforded them a "millionaire" lifestyle. Of those 300 who struck it rich, only 50 kept their wealth for any length of time. George Carmack, whose discovery sparked this Gold Rush, did get rich and reportedly took \$1 million

worth of gold out of his Klondike claims. Amounts vary by source, but the U.S. Mints in Seattle and San Francisco reported receiving an approximate total of \$48 million in Klondike gold between 1897 and 1900.

If you're heading to Skagway or beyond to get a feel for the incredible short-lived Gold Rush, you still might need a pickaxe and some pans, but you probably won't need 25 pounds of potatoes, 15 pounds of salt, or 8 pounds of baking powder. As you walk the streets and visit the sites, you can almost feel the frenzied pace that first filled this gold rush boomtown 115 years ago. And, if you look close enough, maybe, just maybe, you'll see a little left-over gold dust shimmering in the cracks of the plank sidewalks!

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IF YOU GO:

Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park, Skagway Unit

The Visitor Center is housed in the historic 1901 White Pass and Yukon Route Railroad Depot at 2nd & Broadway
(907) 983-9200
www.nps.gov/klgo
FREE admission

Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park, Seattle Unit

319 2nd Ave., South
Seattle, WA 98104
Phone: (206) 220-4240
www.nps.gov/klse
FREE admission

Skagway Visitor Center

AB (Arctic Brotherhood)
building on Broadway
(907) 983-2854
www.skagway.com

White Pass & Yukon Route Railroad

231 2nd Ave.
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