Yukon Settlement Essay, Research Paper

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The Yukon area of Northwestern Canada and Alaska was settled in

the early 1900’s . The gold rush of 1896 through 1900 was a major

contributor to this settlement. Though the terrain is rugged and cold, many

of the prospectors who came in search of the illusive yellow metal found

riches beyond their wildest dreams. Others found homes and places of

business in a country they truly loved. Some flourished and others barely

scraped by, but they all served as a necessary start to the civilization of the

area. Towns began and grew steadily throughout the rush, and a few still

persevered to the present day. This and the people of the gold rush became

factors that settled the great north, and gave the Yukon River the privilege

of being the lifeline of the North.

The gold rush had a very simple and humble beginning, but served as

an awesome part of the settlement of the area. “In the summer of 1896,

three men were working along Rabbit Creek, a small tributary of the

Klondike River. George Carmack, a white “squaw man” married to an

Indian, and his two Indian companions, Skookum Jim and Tagish Charlie,

had been fishing for salmon that summer. The fishing had been poor and

they’d turned to cutting timber which they intended to float down river to

Forty Mile. Bending down to scoop drinking water from the stream,

Skookum Jim discovered gold flakes scattered in the sand along the

bottom.”(Anderson, 42)

“By gentleman’s agreement, prospectors who made a strike were

obliged to pass the news of the discovery to other prospectors. After

claiming seven 500-foot claims along the banks of Rabbit Creek (Soon to

be renamed Bonanza), Carmack and Charlie boarded a log raft for Forty

Mile, leaving Skookum Jim to guard their find.”(Anderson, 42)

“Filing claims and announcing their discovery at Forty Mile, they

galvanized the miners who promptly headed upstream as fast as they

could go. Within days, the town was all but deserted. By mid-September,

prospectors had staked every inch of Bonanza Creek as well as it’s smaller

tributaries and were taking out gold that ran $25 to $50 per pan and

occasionally as high as $500 per pan.”(Anderson, 42-43) They are no

exact numbers as to how many prospectors were involved that far, but the

fever would take time to reach to the rest of the world.

The trip into the rich North was often began at Chilkoot Pass, the

start of a long journey through many perils. “For centuries, powerful and

wealthy Tlingit natives controlled the Chilkoot Trail, an inland trade route

that meandered undisturbed from Pacific water into the headwaters of the

Yukon River. Then, in 1897, the trail’s silence was replaced by the din of

thousands as the news spread from Seattle to San Fransisco to New York:

Gold! Gold in the Klondike!

The gold seekers, looking for the cheapest and quickest passage to

the Klondike, quickly discovered that the 33-mile inland passage would

take them from the now-defunct town of Dyea, Alaska to Canada’s Lake

Bennett and the headwaters of the Yukon River. From the lake, they could

raft the remaining 400 miles to Dawson., where streams where reportedly

“busting with gold.” But soon they discovered that the route to the

Klondike was ponderous, and the Chilkoot Trail was far more formidable

than they imagined.” Heimbuch, T1)

With the onset of winter, difficult living conditions became nearly

impossible, but the lure of gold drove them onward. Subsisting on flour,

beans, and sometimes smoked salmon, many of them contracted scurvy.

They were sickly and ridden with lice. Home was a hastily constructed

hut, lean-to, or tent, filled with smoke and icy cold. Burrowing into the

frozen ground, miners built fires to thaw the gold-bearing gravel then

piled it in clumps to be panned out in the spring. But the hardships paid

off for some of these first Klondikers. They struck it rich beyond their

wildest dreams. The average claim that winter produced about $600,000,

and several topped the 1 million mark. (Anderson, 43)

The Yukon River was and is a major source of transportation in the

North, its ultimate source is the Nisutlin River, a tributary of Teslin Lake.

The Yukon initially flows northwest in Yukon Territory, past Whitehorse,

Carmacks, Fort Selkirk, and Dawson; its main tributaries in this section

are the Big Salmon, Pelly, White, Stewart, and Klondike rivers. The

Yukon then enters Alaska, where it flows west across the state for 1265

miles before emptying through a large delta into the Bering Sea. (Encarta)

The Yukon is navigable by shallow-draft commercial vessels as far

upstream as Whitehorse. Known to Russian fur traders as early as 1831, it

was an important transportation route in the late 19th and early 20th

centuries but now is used principally by local traffic. Several thousand

indigenous people still live in the region and continue to rely at least partly

on hunting and trapping for their livelihood. (Encarta) The Yukon was as

a lifeline to the miners throughout the rush and into the present day.

Goods and supplies are transported up and down the river and it’s many

tributaries. The overall length of the river is 1979 miles, and it flows

through The Yukon territory and Alaska. It serves as a mode of

transportation as well as a way for supplies to reach the many towns along

it’s banks.

Many people were effected by the gold rush of 1896, and many were

changed. Writers, businessmen, people from all walks of life saw the gold

rush mold their lives into something new and different. An article in the

Seattle Post-Intelligencer of July 17 showed this by carrying these banner

headlines:

GOLD! GOLD! GOLD! GOLD!

Sixty-Eight Rich men on

the Steamer Portland

STACKS OF YELLOW METAL!

some have $5,000, Many have more, and

a Few Bring Out $100,000 Each.

THE STEAMER CARRIES $700,000

(Anderson, 44)

This showed just how the media portrayed the events happening

throughout the rush. A few people saw the land and rush in a different

light, as we see in Robert Service’s poem:

The Land God Forgot

The lonely sunsets flare forlorn

Down valleys dreadly desolate;

The lordly mountains soar in scorn

As still as death, as stern as fate

The lonely sunsets flame and die;

The giant valleys gulp the night;

The monster mountains scrape the sky,

Where eager stars are diamond-bright.

So gaunt against the gibbous moon,

Piercing the silence velvet piled,

A lone wolf howls his ancient rune-

The fell arch-spirit of the Wild.

O outcast land! O leper land!

Let the lone wolf-cry all express

The hate insensate of thy hand,

Thy heart’s abysmal loneliness.

(Service, 11)

This poem showed how a person who experienced the terrors of the

Great North felt about the land. Many people went to the Northern

Alaska-Yukon border in search of gold, and instead found themselves.

They had time with but a few companions on many trips and were

allowed the thinking time to figure out just who they are. Gold was a

definite plus to the gold rush, but few people actually came out terribly

rich, others started businesses that have thrived to the present day, such is

the story of Thomas Andrew Firth.

Firth was born and grew up in Ontario, Canada. In his youth he took

a brief trip to Pennsylvania and disappeared from family records. He

resurfaced at the age of 31 to join the Klondike Gold Rush. Firth did not

find gold in the land of the Yukon, so to make the best of his

circumstances, he started a business. The business he started was the Firth

Insurance Agency Brokerage, founded in 1906. The agency is run to this

day by Firth’s family members. (Gold Rushers, WWW) Firth and many

others started business like this, beginning economic growth in the

Yukon.

An organization that specializes in the history of the gold rush, and

personal accounts conducted an interview with firth’s grandchildren. It

shows through their eyes how their Grandpa went through the gold rush.

Ghosts of the Gold Rush spoke with Firth’s grandchildren, Nancy

Houston, 44, and Ton Firth, 50, both live with their families in

Whitehorse, Yukon Territory. Here are a few excerpts:

GHOSTS

How did your grandfather end up in the middle of the Klondike gold

rush?

NANCY HUSTON

My understanding is he was looking for work, as all young men were

in that time, and he was traveling across the United States with a

couple of friends picking up odd jobs here and there and found

himself in the West at the time the Portland came in – July 17, 1897 -

into Seattle. As everybody else, he was all excited about the gold in

the Klondike, and thought that he and a couple of his buddies would

like to go north.

GHOSTS

So they jumped on a steamship in Seattle and ended up in Skagway?

NANCY HUSTON

That’s correct, and he climbed over the Chilkoot (Pass).

GHOSTS

Did he spend time in Skagway and run into Soapy Smith and his army

of thugs and gangsters?

TOM FIRTH

I doubt it. He was already in the Klondike when Soapy Smith met his

end.

GHOSTS

Is there any information about his Chilkoot hike?

TOM FIRTH

He was in partnership with three Americans from Seattle. They

assisted each other getting their supplies over the pass, and they

apparently rafted down and came through (into Dawson City) about

May of ‘98, when there was a whole flotilla of people leaving Bennett

and floating down the lake and coming through the river system.

GHOSTS

They built their own boat at Lake Bennett?

TOM FIRTH

That’s right. They made it out of whipsaw lumber as everybody did,

and when the lake ice went out, everybody launched their boat and

headed off down the lake.

GHOSTS

Did your grandfather experience any trouble on the river system?

TOM FIRTH

My brother told me it was his understanding that they had to check

through the police post in Tagish and that they had contracted with

somebody like Jack London to bring their boats through the rapids

and they hauled their supplies around. They drifted on down to

Dawson arriving…

NANCY HUSTON

…On his birthday, September 1. In the newspaper clippings that

Dad had (it said) that on September 1, on his 31st birthday, he landed

in Dawson City.

TOM FIRTH

He worked for Big Alex McDonald (at one time the richest man in the

Klondike).

NANCY HUSTON

He used to write Alex McDonald’s cheques for him because apparently

he (Big Alex) couldn’t read or write. So our grandfather wrote the

cheques and then witnessed his signature. He (Big Alex) was one of

those who actually made it rich.

TOM FIRTH

We did a rough calculation. My father said he’d written out a

return – what we call a royalty cheque. Because there was no personal

income tax, they paid tax royalties on the gold produced, and this tax

royalty cheque was for $50,000 based on $18 fine ounce value of

gold. Our grandfather wrote out the cheque for (Big Alex) and sent

it into the government. Now, if you take today’s dollars and the value

of gold today, the man’s personal income was probably (the equivalent

of) 5 or 6 million dollars. There was a lot of money flying around up

there. A lot of these fellows were illiterate, so T.A. (grandfather)

found that he could use his skills by assisting them with their

properties, their claims, writing up lay agreements, and witnessing

their signature or their “X.” He coined the expression that his pen was

mightier than his pick. (Gold Rushers, WWW)

This is proof of how a man looking for gold could head to the north,

and not find gold, but still find work, and a new beginning for his life.

In the 1840’s, the Hudson’s Bay Company began establishing trading

post along the Yukon River, helping to start commercial businesses in

Alaska and Northern Canada. The region was virtually unihabitated until

1896, the year of the Gold Rush in the creeks and rivers of the North. At

the peak of the gold rush in 1898, the population of Dawson alone was

more than 400,000. This shows how big of an affect the rush was having

on the region’s population. Over 100 million dollars worth of gold was

discovered in the region between 1896 and 1904. The reason for many

people to be there was to get rich quick, but others also found a new

beginning to their lives. The population of the area began to decline

because of an exhaustion of the richer placeer deposits, in 1921, there

were a mere 4157 people in the Yukon territory. The population had a rise

during World War II with the construction of the Alaska Highway.

In 1901, the population of the Yukon territory was roughly 27

thousand people. In the next decade, the region suffered a great drop in

population the continued into 1931 when the population had dropped to a

mere 4 thousand people. Slowly the region began to rebound economically

and became the mining industrial power that it is today. In 1971, the

population of the Yukon territory was 18 thousand people. From then on,

the population steadily increased showing strong growth. By the year

1991, the population of the Yukon territory had reached it’s early post-

gold rush levels. The population in that year was as it was in 1901, a

astounding 27 thousand people. (Encarta)

The gold rush was an obvious foundation for the growth of the Yukon

territory and Alaska. It was a humble beginning for the economy of the north.

Many people were involved in the rush, and some even died in the search of

gold. Others, who found no gold, found a beginning in their lives. As

Andrew Firth and many others did, they started business that eventually

would become the basis to the economy of The Yukon Territory and Alaska.