Frozen in Memory?: Indigenous Identity in Gold Rush Imagination and Reality

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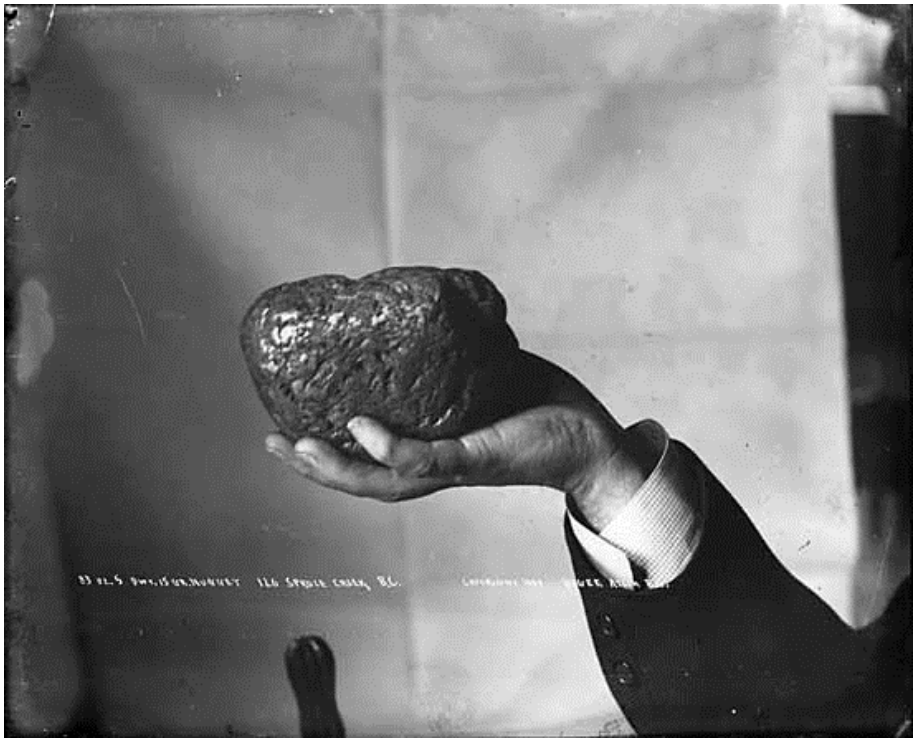
Canada's Northern territories have been inhabited by nomadic Indigenous groups for thousands of years. Despite the challenging geography and climate, First Nations and Inuit peoples have not only *survived* in this land, but maintained a connection to and awareness of it that echoes Mayor Edward Itta's discussion yesterday of the Alaskan Inupiaq people. The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Hän, once a seasonally nomadic people, occupy traditional territory that spans a vast range of mountains, forests, valleys, creeks, and rivers, most notably the Klondike River, where the late summer salmon run provides a vital source of sustenance. The seasonal fishing site at the mouth of the Klondike River is known in the Hän language as *Tr'ondëk*, which loosely translates to "hammer stone water" and describes the large stones used to pound stakes into the river for fish traps (Dobrowolsky 2003). The English-speaking misinterpretation of the word *Tr'ondëk* provided the utterance that would name not only the river mouth, but the entire river and its valley, as well as the Gold Rush that accompanied it.

Indian Dance, 1901. Goetzman. University Of Washington AWC1918

Towards the close of the nineteenth century, the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in had encountered a few scattered groups of European missionaries and fur traders that were living in seasonal rhythms of subsistence in the still uncolonized Yukon Territory. But all because of the shiny, yellow-coloured rocks that sometimes turned up in the rivers and creeks they crossed, fished in, and lived on, something much more testing than the darkness, coldness, and vastness of the land was about to reach the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in.

Chief Isaac at Moosehide. 1898. Curtis. University of Washington 482-46136

Steve Jackstadt and Lee Huskey's Northern Research Forum Position Paper "Adventures in the Alaskan Economy" (2006) explores the underlying and overlooked commodification of ice itself in nineteenth century, using the example of the wealth William Perry gained by selling Alaskan ice to the lower 48. Perry's unusually acquired fortune demonstrates that "value depends on scarcity" (55).



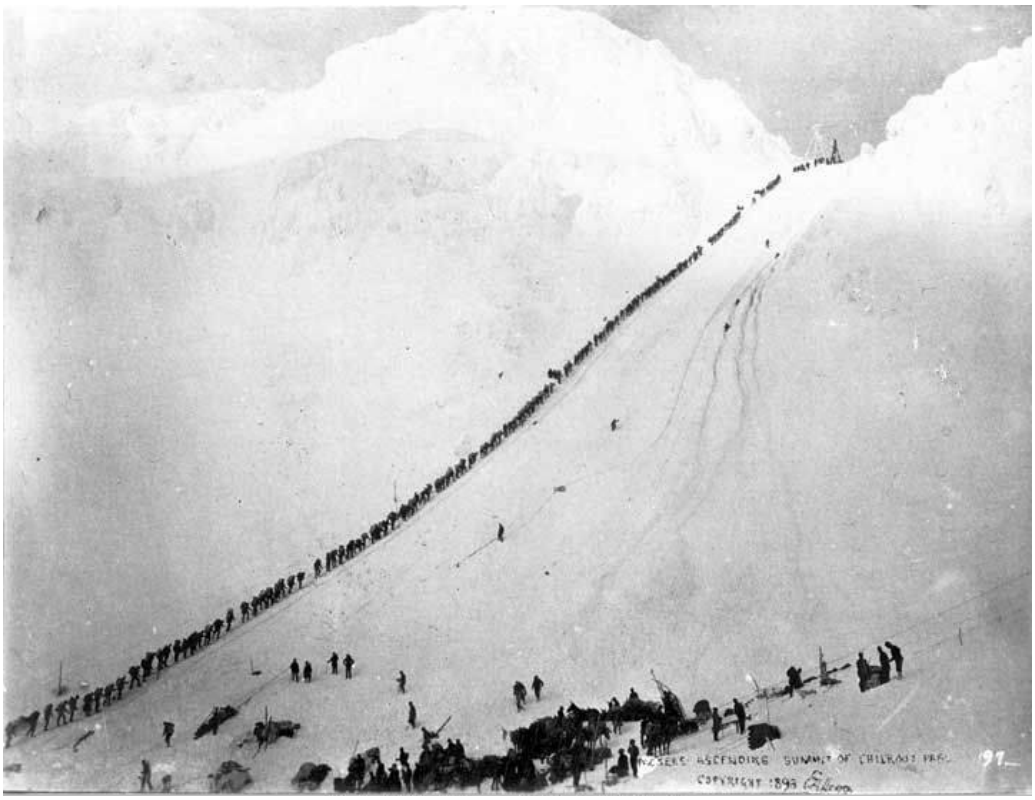
83 oz. 5 DWT, 15 Gr. Nugget. 1899.Vogee. Yukon Archives 119

The Klondike Gold Rush was instigated by the quest for the ultimate scarcity of gold. Mineral exploration and prospecting had been happening on a small scale for decades, but it wasn't until the infamous 1896 discovery in Rabbit Creek, quickly re-named Bonanza Creek, that the rush truly began. In just two short years, the once sparsely-populated Yukon Territory exploded with over 40,000 prospectors, miners, merchants, dancing girls, charlatans, and anyone else seeking fortune or fame by way of this mythic Klondike gold (Coates and Morrison 2005). And though gold was certainly the primary attraction, cultivating the initial frenzied greed that attracted the hoards, the Yukon quickly developed a much more complex lure, representing a "mythical region, never geographically defined" (Berton 1975) and representative of all the wildness and romanticism imagination had to offer.

Dawson from Klondyke City.Curtis.1899. University of Washington UW1452

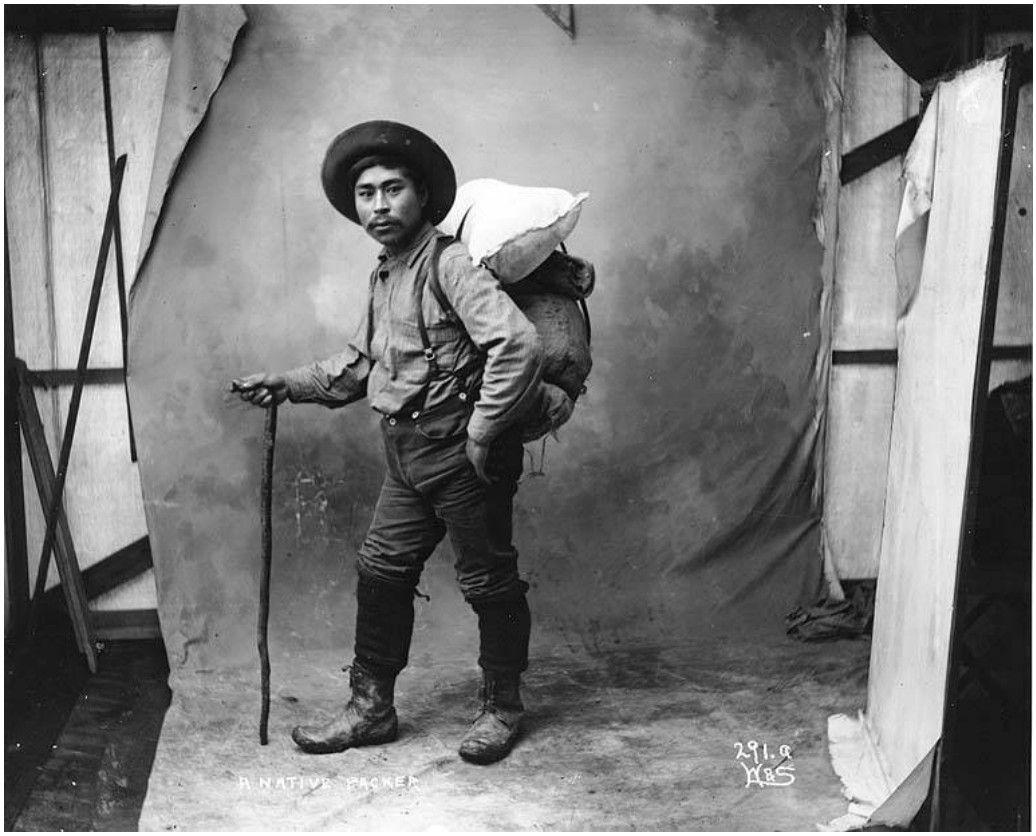
The Yukon quickly became notorious for its harsh, extreme conditions, and the desire to conquer and reap its land became symbolic of defeating nature itself. The incoming settlers carved, cut, and shaped the newly Canadian territory to their own quixotic designs, and this imagining of North included its inhabitants, too. The Yukon indigenous population was instrumental in facilitating travel and passage towards the Klondike Goldfields, serving as guides, cartographers, boat builders, business partners, interpreters, and wives. In fact that momentous day in August of 1896 when Rabbit Creek became Bonanza Creek, it was Skookum Jim Mason who guided his Euro-American Brother-in-Law George Carmacks to the site (Yukon Territorial Archives, 88/58 SR Tape 11-3, 11-4, Johnnie John, "Skookum Jim Discovers Gold,"), though he would not be credited accordingly. Like the land, the animals, the plants, and the minerals, Yukon's indigenous population were viewed as mere props and set-pieces in the

Western fantasy of North, styled in imagination and actuality to represent the untamed North itself.



Packers Ascending Summit of Chilkoot Pass. 1898. Hegg. Library and Archives Canada C-005142

Gold-seekers arriving in the Klondike displaced the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in people from their land and resources and changed the landscape, both physically and culturally, forever. The newcomers were eager to denounce the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, and indeed the Yukon First Nations in general, as inconsequential at best and evil at worst, but problematic regardless (Cruikshank 1992). Yet it was the Indigenous people that not only led these frontiersmen to gold, but provided the experience, knowledge, and skills that enabled the long journeys over snowy mountain passes, swift rivers, and frigid lakes. The First Nations people possessed an intimate connection with this remote and extreme region, but as with most of the Yukon's resources, Indigenous Traditional Knowledge was deemed free for the taking.



Chilkat Packer. 1898. Hegg. Yukon Archives 2561

The Klondike Gold Seekers imagined a world made of ice and snow, filled with riches, and absent of human claim or ownership, and they went to great lengths to realize this romantic ideal—to create a perfect North. But success and fortune were scarce, too, and of the thousands who set out on the perilous trek to the Yukon, certainly not all made it, and of those who did make it to Dawson City, most who arrived after 1897 did not make enough money to pay for their trips, let alone retire with a vast fortune (Coates and Morrison 2005). By 1921, the population of the Yukon was reduced from 40,000 to just 4,000 people, about half of whom were First Nations people who had been there before the newcomers, before the changes, before the rush (Coates and Morrison 2005), and remained after it cleared out. And despite the exodus, the Yukon's reputation continued to expand, and the scarcity of success became part of the allure, part of the fantasy. The "danger, hardship, harsh climate, challenge…and [potential] despair" (77) became "themes of perennial fascination" which helped elevate the Yukon, and

indeed Canada's North in general, to its legendary state, frozen in the memories and imaginations of Western consciousness.

Studio Portrait, Dawson Yukon Territory. 1900. Larss & Duclos.

University of Washington AWC3615

One aspect of this fantastical North did not stay fixed perpetually in a posed postcard of a by-gone era; the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, along with at least ten other distinctive First Nations, managed to withstand the incredible forces of imposition and invention during the Gold Rush. Stories, songs, dances, language, spirituality, Traditional Knowledge and connection to land, landscape, and culture kept moving forward, adapting and protecting, passing information from generation to generation so that stories of strange men digging holes for gold still resonate throughout the generations. Though the colonial attempts to fully transform the Klondike into a constructed, controlled illusion of cinematic 'Northerness' were persistent, the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in continued to retain and remember their traditions and histories, preserving connections to the land, the water, the plants, and the animals; creating new stories, memories, and realities on the same ground their ancestors did (Clarke 99), regaining losses from the Gold Rush era, exploring new possibilities, and eventually becoming self-governing in 1998 (Dobrowolsky 2003).

Yukon River Looking Towards Moosehide from Dawson. 2010. Jen Laliberte

To close, I will return to the core question of this panel-- perhaps we could imagine a Yukon without ice, snow, cold, and maybe even without gold, but without its history, memories, and most importantly its people, there can be no North—real or imagined.

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