

The Klondike Gold Rush

In May of 1896 prospector Robert Henderson came upon George Carmack, his wife Kate, and two American Indians, Skookum Jim and Tagish Charley, as they fished on the Thron-diuck River. Henderson called Carmack aside and told him of a small prospect he had found in a nearby creek.

Encouraged by Henderson's tip, Carmack and his friends sought their own stake on Rabbit Creek, not far from Henderson's site. It was there on August 16th, that the first nugget of gold was found by Skookum Jim. The next day Carmack filed the claim—a claim by an American Indian would not have been recognized—and word began to spread up and down the Klondike. Within weeks the surrounding land was claimed, and Rabbit Creek became known as Bonanza Creek.

By mid-July 1897, the first ships loaded with gold docked in San Francisco and Seattle. The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* chartered a tugboat for its reporters to meet the *Portland* steamer before it reached shore. The headline read "GOLD! GOLD! GOLD! GOLD!" Almost immediately, ships bound for Alaska were nearly bursting with those seeking a quick fortune, including the young Jack London.

Most people could not afford the relatively easy steamship ride to Dawson City and were forced to choose between two deadly overland routes—White Pass and Chilkoot Pass, the "Golden Staircase." White Pass was narrow and steep, covered with ice, and overcrowded with novice fortune hunters. Upwards of 3,000 pack

animals died along this course from exhaustion, starvation, and injury. Chilkoot Pass wasn't much better. In the summer stampedes faced rain and fog in their climb over enormous boulders exposed by the thaw. Pack animals and extra supplies were abandoned as the trail rose 1,000 feet in the last half-mile. Winter conditions were even worse. Blizzards and avalanches were regular occurrences.

Of the 100,000 people who came to the Klondike, only 40,000 arrived in Dawson, most turning back during the arduous mountain journey. Those who did make it were disappointed to find the land already staked, but striking gold wasn't the only way to get rich in the Klondike. Many enterprising newcomers found wealth by establishing businesses in town. Saloons and supply shops were the most lucrative, preying on the exuberant spending of those who struck gold and the naivety of would-be miners.

By 1899, the Klondike Gold Rush was over. With the good land claimed, many stampedes went home empty-handed. Others set out for Nome, Alaska, where gold had just been discovered. The Spanish-American War took the attention of the country and the Klondike Gold Rush faded into memory—until revived imaginatively a few years later by Jack London's *White Fang*, *The Son of the Wolf*, and *The Call of the Wild*.