

# 2

## Lesson Two

### FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the heart of a work of fiction. Studying these contexts and appreciating the intricate details of the time and place can assist us in comprehending the motivations of the characters. In this lesson, use cultural and historical contexts to begin to explore *The Call of the Wild*.

Preparing for the journey to the Klondike was no easy task. The Canadian government enforced a law that required every team of prospectors to carry one thousand pounds of supplies with them to make it over the mountains. Most of this weight came from food (including the recommended 20 pounds of flour, 12 pounds of bacon, 12 pounds of beans, 3 pounds of coffee, and 5 pounds of corn meal). Heavy equipment and the warmest clothing available made up the rest. Once a team reached Dawson, they found much of the land already staked. Many obtained jobs working for other miners, in hotels, bars, or supply shops. Mail, carried entirely by dogsled, was often delayed for months at a time in the winter. Cities like Dawson were also rife with conmen. From its impassable trails to its sawdust bar rooms, the Klondike was a dangerous place.

### Discussion Activities

The Yukon Territory is so large it could cover two-thirds of the western United States. Gary Paulson gives a clear comparison of what the gold rushers went through: “put a hundred-pound pack on your back and then walk from New York to Chicago through dense forest and over huge mountains, subsisting only on what food you could hunt along the way, while working twenty-four hour days, panning and picking for gold in every stream or rock gorge.”

When news of the Gold Rush came in 1897, thousands of people (ninety percent were men) left their homes and families to search for gold, with no certainty they would be successful. Ask your students to describe the Klondike based on what they learned from listening to the CD and reading Handout One. Would your students be motivated to undergo such a treacherous journey? What was life like in your city or town during the 1890s?

### Writing Exercise

In Chapter 1, Buck is stolen from his home and sold north as a sled dog to Perrault and François. Make a map of Buck’s journey, noting what he learns in each new place. In preparation for Lesson Three, students should also pay attention to the way London describes each place from a dog’s point of view.

### Homework

Read *The Call of the Wild*, Chapter 2: “The Law of Club and Fang.” What does Buck learn after he is “suddenly jerked from the heart of civilization and flung into the heart of things primordial”? From this chapter, describe several specific things Buck learns by either experience or instinct.