

Hungry for Wealth, Gold Seekers Once Rushed to Canada's Northwest

This is Faith Lapidus.

And this is Richard Rael with the VOA Special English program EXPLORATIONS. Today we begin the first of two programs about the discovery of gold. Huge amounts of gold. Enough gold to make a person extremely rich. Our story begins in an area called the Klondike in the Yukon Territory of western Canada. The discovery took place on a warm August day in eighteen ninety-six.

George Carmack and his two Indian friends, Skookum Jim Mason and Dawson Charlie, were working near the edge of a small river in western Canada's Yukon Territory. The area was just across the border from Alaska, which was owned by the United States. The men were using large steel pans to search for gold. They placed dirt and rocks in a pan and then filled it about half way with water. Slowly, they moved the water around in the pan until most of the dirt and water washed away. This left only very small rocks.

This method was a very good way to find small amounts of gold. The three men had often worked like this in an effort to find gold. But they had never been very successful.

The three men moved along the small river as they worked. History does not say which of the three found gold first. But it does say that all three began to find large amounts.

In eighteen ninety-six, gold was selling for about sixteen dollars for twenty-eight grams. The three men knew they were rich after just a few days. They also knew they must go to the government office and claim the land. They had to keep their discovery a secret until they had a legal claim to the land where they had found the gold.

George Carmack, Skookum Jim Mason and Dawson Charlie were the first men to discover a great amount of gold in the Klondike. Before that August day, others had found gold, but never in huge amounts.

The three men had found one of the largest amounts of gold ever discovered lying on the surface of the Earth. The news of this discovery could not be kept secret very long. Other people quickly traveled to the area of the great

Klondike River where the three had made the discovery. Some also found huge amounts of gold, enough to make them extremely rich.

On July sixteenth, eighteen ninety-seven, the ship Excelsior came into the American port of San Francisco, California. It carried the first men who had found gold in the Klondike. The next day, the ship Portland landed in Seattle, Washington. It too carried men who had found gold in the Yukon.

Clarence Berry was one of these men. He was a fruit farmer from California. He came off the ship Excelsior in San Francisco with one hundred thirty thousand dollars' worth of gold. Niles Anderson came off the ship Portland with one hundred twelve thousand dollars in gold. They were only two men among more than one hundred who left the ships with huge amounts of money.

Photographs taken when the ships landed show thousands of people meeting the two ships. Newspapers printed long stories about the discovery of gold and the rich men who had just returned from the Yukon. The news quickly traveled around the world that gold had been discovered.

To understand the excitement it caused, you must understand the value of that much money at the time. In eighteen ninety-seven, a man with a good job working in New York City was paid about ten dollars each week. To earn the one hundred thirty thousand dollars that Clarence Berry took off the ship, that man would have had to work for two hundred fifty years!

People all over the world became excited about the possibility of finding gold. Newspaper stories said it was easy to find the gold. It was just lying on the ground. All you had to do was go to Alaska, and then to the Klondike area of the Yukon Territory of Canada and collect your gold.

The possibility of finding gold caused thousands of people to make plans to travel to Alaska and then to the Klondike area of the Yukon. American and Canadian experts say between twenty and thirty thousand people may have traveled to the gold fields.

These people were called "stampedeers." The word "stampede" means a mass movement of frightened animals. In eighteen ninety-seven, the word came to mean the huge groups of people running or stampeding to Alaska and the Klondike.

The people wanted a chance to become rich. The United States was suffering a great economic depression. It had begun in the southern United States as

early as eighteen ninety.

By eighteen ninety-seven, thousands of people were out of work. Men who had no jobs decided to use all the money they had left to go to Alaska. Many believed that it would be worth taking a chance to become extremely rich.

Newspapers and magazines began writing stories about traveling to Alaska. Books told what a person would need to be successful at finding gold. Other books explained sure methods of finding gold.

Many of these books told people what they wanted to hear -- that finding gold in the Yukon was easy. Most of the people who wrote the books had no idea at all where the Canadian Yukon Territory was. Many did not know anything about the American territory of Alaska. The people who wrote the books had no idea what was involved. They were only interested in selling books.

Many of the people who would travel to the gold fields had no idea what they would face. They did not know about the extremely cold weather that could kill. Most did not know they would face extremely hard work and terrible living conditions.

This was not true of the Canadian government. The Canadian government knew how hard it was to live in the western part of the country. The Canadian government quickly approved a law that said each person must bring enough supplies to last for one year. This was about nine hundred kilograms of supplies.



This is a picture of Chilkoot Pass where gold seekers needed to climb 100 years ago for the Klondike gold fields.

Each person would have to bring food, tools, clothing, and everything else they needed for one year. The reason for this was very simple. There were no stores in the Yukon. There was no place to buy food. The nearest port was more than one thousand kilometers away from where the gold discovery had been made.

There were no railroads. At first, there were no roads that would permit a horse and wagon. The stampedees would have to walk all the way, and transport the supplies by themselves. The price of these supplies quickly increased.

In eighteen ninety-seven, a travel company in the middle western American city of Chicago, Illinois listed the prices of what it cost to travel to Alaska. A ticket to ride the train from Chicago to Seattle, Washington was fifty-one dollars and fifty cents. The company said a ticket on a ship from Seattle to Skagway, Alaska was thirty-five dollars.

Companies across the United States offered to sell all the supplies a gold seeker would need to take to the Klondike. Newspapers and magazines printed long lists of the supplies a stamperder would need. The price for these goods was often extremely high. The trains and the ships would carry these supplies for an additional price.

A young man who had the money to buy the supplies and the necessary tickets to travel to Alaska usually landed at the little port of Skagway. The first shiload of several hundred gold seekers landed at Skagway on July twenty-sixth, eighteen ninety-seven. Many ships quickly followed.

The little town of Skagway soon had thousands of people looking for a place to live, food to eat and directions to where they could find gold. The stampederders were in a hurry. They wanted to quickly travel to the area where they could find gold.

Many wanted to buy the rest of the supplies they would need before they began the trip into Canada. These supplies became extremely valuable. Prices increased even more. Violence and a lack of a police department soon caused problems. People fought over supplies.

The gold seekers quickly learned that life in Alaska would be extremely difficult. And they soon learned they still had more than one thousand kilometers to travel. They learned they would have to carry their supplies over high mountains. Then they would need to build a boat to travel on the Yukon River. They learned the last part of their trip would be the hardest of all. That trip and what the thousands of gold seekers found will be our story next week.