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# GOLD IN ALASKA:



A CENTURY OF MINING HISTORY  
IN  
ALASKA'S NATIONAL PARKS

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# **GOLD IN ALASKA: A CENTURY OF MINING HISTORY IN ALASKA'S NATIONAL PARKS**

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# THE RUSH TO THE KLONDIKE

*On July 14, 1897, the fortunes of the North Country were changed forever when the steamship Excelsior arrived in San Francisco. The Excelsior, which had left the western Alaskan port of St. Michael a month before, carried a curious coterie of men and women. Observers near the dock paid little attention as the haggard, worn assemblage trudged down the gangplank, but within hours, word leaked out that they carried a total of more than a ton of solid gold. Newspapers gave the discovery front page coverage, and the Klondike gold rush was on.*

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## THE FEVER STRIKES

**K**londike fever—a huge, chaotic migration of men and their goods to the storied gold fields—reigned for almost a year afterward. It swept through all of North America, but was felt most keenly in the Pacific Coast ports, where hundreds of ships left with Klondike-bound prospectors and where supply houses and other businesses reaped an economic windfall.

The big rush had begun almost a year earlier in the remote, isolated Yukon River drainage in the center of today's Yukon Territory. A Tagish Indian, Skookum Jim, along with Dawson Charlie and an ex-California miner named George Carmack, stumbled upon gold "lying like cheese in a sandwich" on the afternoon of August 16, 1896. They registered their claim the next day at a nearby trading post, and within two weeks miners from hundreds of miles around had converged on the discovery site and had blanketed the nearby creeks with mining claims. But the site was hundreds of miles from an ocean port and transportation facilities were poor or worse, so months went by before the outside world got the news. And it was not until mid-July 1897 that dramatic, irrevocable proof in the form of gold—lots of it—caused thousands to drop everything and stampede north to the new Eldorado.

It seemed that most everyone—Americans, Canadians, and a score of other nationalities—wanted to go north. But how? Few knew much about the north country, and even fewer knew their way around. As a result, thousands of gullible argonauts succumbed to unscrupulous ship captains or mercenary civic interests and took routes that required

hundreds of miles of overland travel through forests, swamps, and even glaciers. The wise among them quickly recognized the folly of their choice and turned back. But others, driven by gold fever or too proud to recognize their fate, trudged on into the northern wilderness, many never to return.

Three routes quickly emerged as pre-eminent paths to the gold fields. Those who could afford it took the so-called "all water" route which carried stampedees up the Alaska coast to St. Michael, at the mouth of the Yukon River, and then up the river to the gold fields. The route, in theory, seemed easy and efficient. But stampedees soon found that few boats existed along the Yukon River; furthermore, the navigation season was so short that ice choked the river in early October. Almost no one who took this route made it to the gold fields that year.

The other two routes were located just a few miles from each other. Both began at the northern end of the Inside Passage. The Chilkoot Trail, a path over the Coast Mountains which had been used by the Tlingit Indians for hundreds of years before miners became interested in the area, began at the port of Dyea and surmounted Chilkoot Pass on its way to Lindeman and Bennett lakes in the Canadian interior. Just a few miles away from Dyea lay Skagway Bay. In the valley nearby, developments were far newer; the only inhabitants before the rush were a single homesteader and his family. The 40-mile White Pass Trail, which connected the homestead with the Canadian lakes, was a rough, rocky pathway that had existed only since 1895.

By the end of July 1897, thousands had responded to the Klondike's clarion call and were already headed north. On Skagway Bay, a tent town called Skagway sprang into existence just above the high tide line, and hundreds streamed north. Nearby Dyea witnessed the same frenzy of activity. While those who took the well-trodden Chilkoot had few difficulties in their quest, the untried White Pass trail was soon overwhelmed with men and animals, all of whom were desperately heading north. Traffic slowed and then halted in a cesspool of mud and dead animals, and the trail soon became infamous as the "Dead Horse Trail."

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## GETTING TO THE GOLD

Relatively few of those who left the west coast ports in the summer of 1897 ever made it to the gold fields before winter set in; most of the successful ones used the Chilkoot Trail. The others waited until early 1898 to set out, and from January to May the stampede reached its height. By late May, tens of thousands of stampederers were camped out along the Canadian lakes, eagerly waiting for the ice to break, and on May 30 the stampede began anew as more than 7,000 boats headed downstream in the race to the Klondike gold fields.

The first boats in the gold rush armada soon reached Dawson City, the new gateway to the gold fields. These stampederers, and those who followed, scrambled out of their craft only to learn, much to their dismay, that the gold fields were rich but limited. All of the gold-laden creeks had been staked months earlier, and there simply was no easy gold for the taking.

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## **NO CLAIMS LEFT**

**H**aving received this shocking news, the incoming hordes wondered: what to do now? Many wandered about Dawson, as if in a daze, and tried to make sense of their new environment. Some decided to head out to the nearby gold fields and work for wages—good wages—in one of the many mines along Bonanza, Eldorado, and nearby creeks. Others got work at one of the many shops in the mushrooming town or went into business for themselves.

But still others, those who still had “gold fever” despite the enormous number of hardships they had expended just to reach Dawson, either struck out on their own or bided their time and awaited news of the next big strike. It was inevitable, given the huge amount of unexplored area and the number of eager gold prospectors, that new gold prospects would soon be uncovered. Near Nome, off in northwestern Alaska, a huge strike was made in September 1898, and in August 1902, an Italian immigrant named Felix Pedro found the gold that uncovered an even larger series of gold fields near Fairbanks, in Alaska’s interior.

The Nome and Fairbanks fields turned out to be Alaska’s largest, but from the 1890s to the 1920s, gold was discovered

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in hundreds of other places throughout the length and breadth of the territory. Some of those discoveries brought a rush of eager prospectors to the area, while others were composed of just a few claimants who doggedly, and in obscurity, attempted to extract “colors” from the rocks and gravels.

Many of those discoveries took place in Alaska’s national park units. Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park, located in and near Skagway and containing portions of both the Chilkoot and White Pass trails, is the only park unit in Alaska (or in America) that commemorates a gold rush. Alaska’s remaining park units were created, at least primarily, in order to preserve scenic, wildlife, botanical, glacial, or geological resources. Surprisingly, however, most of Alaska’s park units contain at least some evidence of the state’s far-flung gold rush past. A sample of those park units, and the exciting gold-rush history contained within them, is outlined in the next few pages...

# THE KANTISHNA RUSHES

*This year begins the centennial celebration that will mark the discovery of gold and subsequent opening of the last frontier that is Alaska. Nearly everyone has heard of the Bonanza strike near Dawson City, and the rush to make a fortune. However, most people are unaware of the gold rushes, booms and busts that occurred within the current boundaries of Denali National Park and Preserve in a place now known simply as Kantishna.*

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## WICKERSHAM, DALTON AND QUIGLEY



The year was 1903, early summer. The brunt of the gold rush in the Yukon was over; hundreds of prospectors were out of work, hanging around towns like Fairbanks waiting for word of newly discovered gold fields. During this time, District Judge James Wickersham, along with four others, took the summer to explore the region around the great mountain - Denali - with the intention of being the first to climb it. Although they were unsuccessful in climbing the peak, they were the first to discover gold in the area. It was the filing of these claims that captured the attention of several prospectors and opened the doors into the pristine Kantishna hills.

Among the first prospectors to venture into the Kantishna Hills were Joseph Dalton and Joseph Quigley - two men who would figure prominently into Kantishna's mining history. In 1904, Dalton and his partner successfully prospected the Toklat River basin. In the summer of 1905, Joe Quigley and his partner, Jack Horn, found gold in paying quantities in Glacier Creek.



*The Kantishna Area*



After staking the creeks, they carried the news to Fairbanks, starting the first stampede in the Kantishna Hills. Within weeks, 2-3,000 gold seekers found their way up the Tanana, Kantishna, and Bearpaw rivers, eventually staking every drainage in the Kantishna Hills from head to toe. Mining towns sprang up seemingly overnight: Diamond and Glacier City on the Bearpaw; Roosevelt and Square Deal on the Kantishna; and Eureka, a summer mining camp centrally located near active pay streaks.

Within six months the easy pickings were gone and the rush was over. Miners left in droves, leaving behind less than fifty inhabitants to continue placer mining. Some ventured into hard-rock mining or engaged in the mining of other minerals: silver, lead, zinc, and antimony. However, the transportation problems which would always plague the Kantishna mining district proved to be its downfall in ore production. There was no way to economically work a hard-rock mine without heavy equipment. Without roads into the area, no equipment could get in, and it was too expensive to transport overland or by boat. By 1925, mining had ceased almost completely.

The 1930s brought a series of breaks to the Kantishna mining district. President Franklin Roosevelt raised the price of gold to \$35 per ounce; the park road was completed, linking Kantishna to the railroad; and the Depression era produced large quantities of cheap labor. Central to the second "boom" was the development of the Banjo Mine on Quigley Ridge.

The Banjo mine was the area's first commercial-scale lode gold milling operation. It eventually become the fourth largest lode mine in the Yukon basin, producing more than 6,000 ounces of gold and 7,000 ounces of silver between 1939 and 1941. Kantishna's highest aggregate placer gold return was \$139,000 in 1940.

This golden era came to an end with the coming of World War II. All labor, fuel, equipment and supplies were channeled into the war effort. An order shutting down all gold mining operations non-essential to the war effort, closed the Banjo mine. It was never reopened.

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## THE FIRST RUSH ENDS

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## KANTISHNA IN THE 1930S

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## **MINING IN THE PARK**

In 1976, the Mining in the Parks Act passed, essentially terminating any further mineral entry and location. The law also placed a four-year moratorium on surface disturbance for mineral exploration and development of existing valid claims in national parks.

In 1980, President Jimmy Carter signed into law the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), which expanded Mt. McKinley National Park by approximately four million acres. The Kantishna mining district was completely surrounded by the newly designated Denali National Park and Preserve. By the mid 1980's, the Kantishna gold mining district ranked 27th in the state for overall production of gold. Nearly 100,000 ounces have been extracted from these hills.



*Miners in front of a network of flumes.*

Little remains of the old towns that flourished nearly 100 years ago in the heart of Alaska's frontier. Today, the focus of activity in the Kantishna district is tourism. Only the town of Eureka, now called Kantishna, is left behind to remind us of the golden years not so long ago.

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## **FANNY QUIGLEY**

Originally from rural Nebraska, Fanny arrived in the north country around 1898. She began as a dance-hall girl in Dawson City, then followed the numerous stampedes as a cook for the miners, as well as prospecting and mining for herself. The Stampede brought Fanny to Kantishna where she established a legacy of hospitality and independence still remembered today.



In 1906, Fanny married Joe Quigley, one of the original prospectors of the Kantishna Hills. The home they established was renowned for extensive vegetable and flower gardens, and a permafrost meat cellar. It is said that the small-framed Fannie could hunt, fish, and pack her share of game as well as any man; and could prepare a gourmet meal that was unsurpassed.

First and foremost, Joe and Fanny were miners. They developed gold, zinc, antimony, lead, silver and copper discoveries. The Red Top Mine, owned and operated by Joe Quigley, became the biggest ore-producing mine in the area.

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# LAKE CLARK: GOLD COUNTRY

*Henry Mellish, Percy Walker and Al King were the first prospectors to explore the mineral potential of the remote Lake Clark country of Southwest Alaska. They entered the upper Mulchatna River district, west of the boundary of what is now Lake Clark National Park and Preserve, in 1890. The trio found gold, but the product was "too fine and flaky to save," and they moved on in search of a more profitable strike. For the next forty years, miners would comb the Lake Clark region in search of a paying claim.*

The Turnagain Arm gold rush of 1895-98 brought a bonanza of prospectors to Alaska. Late-comers spilled over into the Lake Clark-Iliamna region when they found that all the likely Turnagain claims had been staked.

Portage Creek, near the Dena'ina village of Kijik, soon became the site of heavy placer mining activity. The 1900 census for Kijik, located on the north shore of Lake Clark, listed 17 gold miners among its residents. Among the earliest were Otis M. "Doc" Dutton and Joe Kackley, who settled in what is now the Port Alsworth area. The two remained there until their deaths in the 1940s.

Kasna Creek also attracted the attention of miners in the early 1900s. Judge Charles T. Brooks and Count Charles Von Hardenberg filed copper claims along the creek, not far east of Port Alsworth. Kasna Creek continued to lure prospectors and mining corporations to the area off and on until the 1950s.

The remoteness of the Kasna Creek mining operations worked against their development. In 1911, the estimated cost of shipping mining equipment from Seattle to Kasna Creek was \$200 per ton. Miners on the creek were paid \$4 per day plus board.

In 1904, after several parties had revisited the site of the 1890 discovery, a renewed promise of wealth beckoned miners to return. Reports came of placer claims which were "said to yield \$4 to \$5 a day to the man, but their inaccessibility makes them of no commercial value."

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## THE DISCOVERY



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## PAY DIRT ON KASNA CREEK

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## MULCHATNA

In 1910, Jack Kinney of Lake Iliamna discovered gold in the Bonanza Hills, creating a small stampede into the Mulchatna country. Included in this group was O. B. Millett, a Lake



*Hans Seversten*

Iliamna miner who had become famous in 1897 as the discoverer of the Klondike's "white channel gravels" along Bonanza Creek. Worthwhile claims were located along Bonanza Creek, Tim Creek and Parmigan Creek. Some miners remained as late as 1914 before moving on to other endeavors.

Hans Seversten, a Tarragan miner in 1897, moved to the Mulchatna district in 1908-1909. He married the widow of Judge C.T. Brooks, and became an entrepreneur in the Upper Bristol Bay region. At the time of his death in 1939, Seversten was considered the region's preeminent merchant. His roadhouse at what is now Iliamna was the first lodge in the region.

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## PORTAGE CREEK OPERATIONS

Between 1914 and the beginning of World War II, determined miners drew small amounts of gold from the Lake Clark country. In 1914 and again in 1917, the Portage Creek claims produced several hundred dollars' worth of the yellow metal. Miners conducted assessment work nearby, but found no paying prospects.

Most were pessimistic about the region's prospects. A 1913 government report noted that except for the Portage Creek claims, there was "no active mining in the Iliamna region." A similar report, issued in 1929, painted an even bleaker picture of the area's mineral potential. The report stated that "no placer mining was in progress in this region" and that with few exceptions, "the outlook for the finding of profitable gold placer deposits in this region is less promising."

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## HARSH REALITIES

Prospectors often made bold plans for exploration without adequate knowledge of the Alaskan environment. Many men were forced to return home without having reached their destination.

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The five-member Gillespie-Widm Party, for example, left Unalaska in 1901, bound for the upper Kuskokwim drainage with 4,700 pounds of provisions. Winter travel by dog sled over the snow and ice made their journey easier than summer travel by foot or boat. They transported their outfit up the Stony River and overland to Telaquana Lake. There, the poor traveling conditions of an early breakup forced them to abandon 1,800 pounds of supplies. They made their way down the Telaquana Trail to Lake Clark, and by June 1902, reached Iliamna Bay on Cook Inlet. To protect their food, tents and mining equipment from animals and weather, miners often built caches of spruce logs.



*O.B. Miller built this cache around 1909 at Little Bonanza Creek.*

Perhaps the most significant mining operation based on Portage Creek was the Bowman Mine. Fred Bowman, an Anchorage blacksmith, acquired a series of working claims along the creek. At first he leased the claims to others, but in 1936, he took over the operation himself.

Using a small crew, Bowman operated the claims using hydraulic methods until the beginning of World War II. Gold mining was declared non-essential to the war effort, and with rare exception, mining operations were denied supplies and labor. Undaunted, Bowman resumed operations after the war, and he continued to work his placer claims until his death in 1958. Bowman's son Howard then took over and worked the claims for several years after Fred's death.

The Bowmans extracted several hundred ounces of gold from their Portage Creek claims.

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## THE BOWMAN MINE



*Fred Bowman (right), Brown Carlson (left) and Carlson's son-in-law Tommy Meyers, along Portage Creek.*

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## FEDERAL SURVEYS

The Territorial, Federal and state governments have a long history of mineral exploration in the Lake Clark region. The first United States Geological Survey expedition into the Lake Clark area, led by George C. Martin and F. J. Katz, took place in 1909. Later USGS surveys occurred in 1914, 1928 and 1929.



In the reports of their ventures, the USGS parties wrote primarily about geology and mineral occurrences, but they touched on a variety of other topics such as the area's topography, its transportation network, its people and lifeways. Much of what we know about the history of Lake Clark country is due to the accuracy and completeness of their work.

Today, there is little active mining going on within Lake Clark and Preserve or in the surrounding area.

Several parties, however, continue to hold claims and vow to continue their search for gold and other precious minerals. They recognize, as did their predecessors, that "gold is where you find it."

*Above: Vasil Rikteroff and his family at their home at Old Ilamna in 1897 or 1898. This photo was probably taken by prospector Lt. Hugh Rodman. Rikteroff guided Lt. Rodman on an informal Navy reconnaissance of the Ilamna-Lake Clark area in search of gold.*

# THE CHISANA RUSH

*Nestled in a remote valley between the Nutzotin and Wrangell mountains, the Chisana mining district provides visitors with a unique glimpse of Alaska's gold rush era. Unlike many better known and more accessible regions, this area retains extensive evidence of its early mining era, including the deteriorating remains of two towns; numerous tent camps; various water diversion and delivery systems; a full range of hand, hydraulic, and mechanical mining operations; and a well-developed transportation network.*

After years of searching, gold was discovered in this area in May 1913. Credit for the discovery must be divided among at least five individuals. Four—Nels Nelson, Billy James, Matilda Wales, and Fred Best—were experienced prospectors, veterans of the Klondike rush. The fifth, an Alaska Native nicknamed Shushanna Joe, guided the others to the site of their strike. Nels Nelson located the first gold on Bonanza Creek, but partners Billy James and Matilda Wales made a much more important find a few days later. As Wales subsequently told it,

*When we got to a strong creek running into Bonanza, we followed it up and looked for the rim. At one place Billy spoke to me, saying, "Let me have the pan; here's a little leadrock cropping out." He took the pan, and to our surprise got five to ten dollars in bright gold. . . . We then prospected a little further up, and found gold and staked a discovery. The claims where we got the rich pans we staked at No. 1 and named the creek Little Eldorado.*

The group's discoveries electrified the region, provoking what many have called America's last great gold rush. The *Concise Daily Alaskan*, for example, proclaimed the strike as "the richest" since the Klondike, causing defections which virtually emptied the Nizina gold camps and even briefly jeopardized the operation of Kennecott's huge, nearby copper complex.

**GOLD!**



*Chisana district was home to a small number of women, typically serving as cooks, shopkeepers, and barbers. The tent frame above, housing a mine and his wife, was located near Bonanza Creek.*

## A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Despite the hardships, several thousand stampeders reached the Chisana diggings. Those that stayed eventually established two communities: Chisana City, just east of the Chisana River, and Bonanza City, located at the mouth of Bonanza Creek. Seattle reporter Grace G. Borwick, one of the district's first female residents, left an evocative description of Chisana City in the spring of 1914:



Freighter Ed Johnson prepares to leave Bonanza City for McCarthy. Local miners nicknamed Johnson "Too Much," for his habit of unloading freight on the Niina Glacier whenever and wherever its weight got to be too much for his dogs.

*The camp is fast assuming the air and ways of a town. Men mostly share men, where formerly they were rough and hoarded. They are also more particular about their clothing. The most interesting period of the camp . . . the pioneer days . . . when one after another of the first cabins were built, when delicacies of any sort were absolutely unknown, and when magazines and books were prizes eagerly longed for are past . . .*

*There are by this time two bath tubs in the place, as there are ironies, tea kettles, and many other luxuries formerly unknown. It only remains for the eagerly anticipated strike to materialize, in which event the camp will become a bona fide town with great rapidity, even though it is said to be the most inaccessible camp yet started in Alaska.*



Photographed just above Bonanza Creek, this well-dressed prospector's outfit (left) includes a rifle, pick, shovel, gold pan, and waders. Not all stampeders were as well prepared for the Alaskan experience. Thomas Riggs, then head of a government surveying party and a future governor of Alaska, remembered meeting one man

*—going into the interior with a horse on which he had packed ten pounds of raisins, having been informed that raisins were unusually efficacious in sustaining life in that country. We found scores of persons who had absolutely no idea how to pack their horses and who were carrying in supplies that could not possibly sustain them.*



Canadian geologist DeLorme D. Cairnes provided a similar account. He related encountering many prospectors "who had been three weeks on the way, wandering all over the country and living principally on gophers."

Local miners never made that long-expected strike. The district's boom was brief, and by the mid-1920s both communities were largely abandoned. Milton Medary, who visited Chisana City in 1924, described it as "452 log cabins in which one man lives alone."

*Miners assemble a sluice box on Upper Bonanza Creek in about 1914. Their manufactured wheelbarrow is unusual, as most were locally produced.*



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## THE BOOM ENDS

Today, Chisana enjoys a seasonal population of about twenty-five. A few persistent placer miners continue to work the district's creeks. The spiritual heirs of the stampedeers, they continue their predecessors' quest, ever searching for that one rich strike.

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## CHISANA TODAY

# THE VALDEZ TRAIL

*In 1896, discoveries near Canada's Klondike River precipitated the region's greatest gold rush. Most stampeders reached the district via a largely Canadian route leading from the southeast Alaskan community of Dyea through Chilkoot Pass. Many American participants, however, objected to the foreign control of that transportation corridor. In response, the U.S. government agreed to construct an alternate trail, leading from Prince William Sound into the Yukon Basin.*

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## THE ROUTE NORTH



The army sent Captain William R. Abercrombie to the region in 1898 to locate the safest and most efficient route for the trail. Abercrombie worked quickly, and by September 1899 the government's half-finished route was already filled with prospectors headed for the Copper Valley. Encouraged by such traffic, construction continued, and by 1901 the military had completed its trail all the way to Eagle City.

Mountaineer Robert Dunn employed the trail the following year on his way to Copper Center. Unlike the stampeders, who were often too preoccupied to note its spectacular scenery, Dunn recorded a vivid description of the route:

*By night we had gone twenty miles up the Lowe River—its bed a strip of Arizona in the exotic forest—and then through Keystone Canyon by a five-foot trail cut in the cliff's face a thousand feet above the stream. In the canyon were two waterfalls, each 700 feet high. . . . Another day among ptarmigan and ice and blue morainal tarns took us over the misty pass and into the great valley of the Copper River.*

Despite its proximity to the Klondike, Eagle City did not remain the region's primary destination for long. Mineral production on the upper Yukon River soon began to decline and in 1902, Felix Pedro discovered gold in the Tanana Valley. Stampeders heading for this new strike left the Valdez-Eagle Trail near the Gakona River, crossed the Alaska Range through Isabel Pass, then followed the Tanana River northwest to Fairbanks. By 1904 this Valdez-Fairbanks Trail had become the dominant interior route.

The new path soon received its first improvements. In 1905 President Theodore Roosevelt established the Board of Road Commissioners for Alaska (popularly known as the Alaska Road Commission or ARC) and designated Major Wilds P. Richardson as president. Richardson was particularly concerned about the development of interior Alaska and emphasized the speedy construction of a more permanent Valdez-Fairbanks route.

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## THE ALASKA ROAD COMMISSION



*In 1913, the first motorized vehicle traveled the trail, later designated as the Richardson Highway.*

By 1905, enterprising citizens had located "roadhouses" along the entire route. Usually owned by homesteaders, these inns provided travelers with a convenient and comfortable place to stop. As most operators cultivated gardens, many supplied fresh vegetables in season. Not surprisingly, these lodges became the local nodes—what Richardson called "small centers of settlement and supply"—from which to explore the surrounding country. Many, like Copper Center, Big Delta, and Salcha, eventually developed into sizable communities.

In 1913 the first automobile traveled the entire length of the trail. Although it only averaged about nine miles per hour, others quickly followed. By 1918, automobile stage coaches plied regular routes between Valdez and Fairbanks, and motorized vehicles carried most of the mail. No longer a trail, in 1919 the Road Commission redesignated the route as the Richardson Road in honor of its newly retired first president, Wilds Richardson.

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## ROADHOUSES AND AUTOMOBILES



*Neil Doty at her Psamigan Roadhouse, 21 Miles from Valdez, 1902*

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## THE MAIL MUST GO THROUGH!

Actions taken by the Alaska Road Commission to make the Valdez-Fairbanks trail more passable substantially improved local life. Mail, for example, could be delivered much more quickly. While previous contractors often took two weeks to traverse the distance between Valdez and Fairbanks, mail carrier Ed Orr completed the journey



during the winter of 1906-07 in a record time of only six days, ten hours, and ten minutes.

*Photographed in 1907, Ed Orr's stage as it left Valdez for Fairbanks.*

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## THE TRAIL TODAY

Much of the Valdez Trail now lies buried beneath its major successors, the Richardson and Glenn highways. Nevertheless, some important pieces remain. The segment between the Tanana and the Fortymile rivers, for example, was largely abandoned following the Fairbanks gold discovery, and therefore exemplifies the earliest period of trail construction. Other sections, like the one found near the visitor center at Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, were bypassed later, and represent subsequent building epochs.



*Horses leaving Wortman's Roadhouse on the Valdez Trail.*

The Valdez Trail provided the first overland access to much of interior Alaska and played a major role in its subsequent development. A closing thrust in a period of pioneer American trail building, the Valdez Trail channeled people, freight, and mail into the region, promoting mining activity, aiding the development of supporting industries, and hastening the settlement of the Copper, Yukon, and Tanana River valleys.

# THE RUSH TO CIRCLE CITY

*Prospectors found gold in and around what is now Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve several years before the rich Yukon Territory strikes inspired the overwhelming rush to the Klondike. In the late 1800s, prospectors pushed their search for gold into northern Canada and Alaska. Using the traditional Tlingit Indian trade route through Chilkoot Pass, miners reached the headwaters of the Yukon and traveled downstream, prospecting along the way.*

Several prospectors struck gold in 1885-1886 on the Stewart and Fortymile rivers, upstream from what is now Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve, in enough quantity to encourage miners to extend their search farther down the Yukon. In 1892 gold was found at Birch Creek, leading to the founding of Circle City, just downstream from the present day Preserve boundaries.

By 1896, Circle City had a population of 700 and boasted theaters, saloons, dance halls, and two major trading companies, the Alaska Commercial Company and the North American Transportation and Trading Company. A fleet of steamboats supplied the companies and other trading posts with goods transported from Saint Michael, on the coast.

The Klondike strike, in August of 1896, nearly emptied Circle City and the town of Forty Mile as miners raced to the Klondike goldfields and the newly founded town of Dawson City. But reality soon struck, and American miners realized that most of the good claims were already staked. The Canadian government, moreover, limited the size of the claims, charged import duties on miners' equipment, and levied a 10% royalty on the miners' earnings. Disgusted, many of the miners turned downstream to American territory. They expressed their displeasure with Canadian restrictions by giving patriotic names to various locations along the Yukon—Independence Creek, Eagle City, Fourth of July Creek, American Creek, Nation City, and Union Gulch.

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## GOLD ON THE FORTYMILE



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## KLONDIKE GOLD

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## CITIES ON THE YUKON



*Flame tents such as this one were the homes of the work-hardened miners. In spite of temperatures dropping to -70 and below, they persevered, drawn forward by the dream of striking it rich, or pushed on by debts owed.*

As the miners located new goldbearing streams or returned to old favorites, towns were constructed nearby to provide support. The year 1898 saw the building of several communities including Eagle City, Seventymile City, and Star City (when Seventymile flooded). Also in 1898, miners established Ivy City and Nation City, based on gold prospects in Fourth of July Creek.

Miners on the Charley River were served by the tiny town of Independence, founded in 1899. Most of these towns were short-lived, but Nation City survived until the 1930s with a small population who lived by mining and chopping wood for the steamboats. Eagle City never died and today is a town with many reminders of its gold rush past.

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## TRADE

The traditional lifeways of the Han Gwich'in people who lived in the Yukon-Charley area were dramatically changed by the gold rush. Han people were accustomed to trading at Fort Reliance and at Belle Island. With the discovery of gold at Fortymile River, a new trading post was established at its mouth, Belle Island, near the site of present day Eagle, closed. This made gold the trading priority rather than furs. It put the Han at a disadvantage and forced them to make the long trip to Forty Mile to get the food and other supplies that they had come to depend upon. In the years that followed, Euroamerican prospectors and miners overran Han territory, killing and frightening off animals, cutting trees, and displacing Native people from their traditional camps.

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## DIVERSIFICATION

By the turn of the century, the Alaska Commercial Company had established a coal mine on the bank of the Nation River one mile from the Yukon. Coal was extracted, transported by sled to the Yukon, then taken to Dawson for sale or used as steamship fuel.

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Fueling a steamship on the Yukon required forty to fifty cords of wood a day. Woodcutting to supply the many ships that plied the river proved a reliable means of earning money. Miners and Native people alike took advantage of the opportunity to earn cash.

Trading posts have a long history on the Yukon. Originally attracted to the country by the fur trade, traders quickly saw the potential of outfitting prospectors. They provided food and equipment to the miners, and carried the miners' debt for years. This guaranteed that the miners would continue working and that the trader who grubstaked them would get their business when they did strike gold.

Cobbled rafts, whipsawed boats, hutch bark canoes and every manner of vessel traveled the Yukon carrying supplies, men and women. Prospectors who ventured into the Yukon basin settled down, only to move again when word of bigger and better ground reached them. Thousands came north during the 1890s, and it was not uncommon to see the same miners, businessmen and layabouts in Circle City, Dawson City, Nome, Fairbanks and other gold rush communities.

Remnants of those days and that bygone era remain, allowing the visitor to become a part of the struggle which kept the miner toiling in the often frozen ground. Alice Bayless, an old-timer from Eagle, noted that one prospector, new to the country, was optimistic to an extreme:

*He came from some big city, and he carried with him a backaxe. I remember them asking what he was going to do with it and, he said "I'm just going to saw just a chunk off of the mother lode. I don't need a very big chunk to take back with me." And, he never found it.*

According to Alice, mining methods were often quite simple. "It was done with a pick and shovel and a small string of boxes."

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## THE PROSPECTOR'S LIFE



Miners "abreasting in" to a sluice.

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## MOVING ON

The region that is now Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve played an important role in the gold rush history of the Yukon River. In waves of boom and bust, the area supported early prospecting activities; saw the growth and demise of Forty Mile, Circle City, and other towns; witnessed the return of disenchanting miners from the Klondike; and served as a corridor for supplies and people to and from the ephemeral gold fields. All of this in addition to providing wood, coal and food resources for the thousands of people who came. Boasting four active mining towns during the gold rush, Yukon-Charley Rivers offers today's visitors a glimpse into the lives of the miner who sought to find that eldorado which was always "over the next hill."



# KOBUK VALLEY STAMPEDE

*During the 1880s and 1890s, gold seekers explored many of Alaska's river basins for mineral wealth. By the spring of 1898, the stampede to the Klondike was in full swing and reputed gold producing areas were prospected by transportation companies and outfitters and who hoped to make their fortunes by supplying prospective miners. Rumors of gold strikes on the Kobuk River in northwest Alaska enticed hundreds of prospectors and adventurers who were looking for a less crowded route to riches than that of a trip to the Klondike.*

There are several accounts of how the rumor of gold riches on the Kobuk began. Captain Cogan, owner of the bark *Alaska*, told of a prospector who found \$15,000 in gold in two hours on the Kobuk in 1897. In the spring of 1898, Cogan transported 40 prospectors and their outfits to Kotzebue.

In March of 1898, the *San Francisco Chronicle* published a letter from prospector John Ross, saying that he had obtained \$50,000 worth of gold on the Kobuk River.

These accounts, as well as a number of others that flooded the news on both coasts of the United States, turned out to be lies. Nonetheless, a fleet of ships left the west coast of the U.S. during the spring of 1898, bound for Kotzebue with almost 2,000 would be prospectors on board.

Most of the gold seekers arrived in Kotzebue by early July and prepared to build boats which would take them up the Kobuk River. They immediately got word from the Friends' missionaries in Kotzebue and from local Inupiat Natives that no gold had been found on the Kobuk.

After a cursory look at the country, more than half of the prospectors returned to their ships to travel home before winter.

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## TALES OF GOLD



*The Agnes E. Boyd on the Kobuk River*

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## CABINS AND STEAMERS

About 800 of the prospectors heard that there was wood for building cabins on the Kobuk River. Having come this far with decent provisions, they decided that they would have a look before turning back.

By the end of the summer, the prospectors had found places from which they could prospect, several of which were



*Residents of Camp Penelope on the Kobuk*

located in what is now Kobuk Valley National Park. Men joined together to build cabins. There was competition among the camps for the honor of the most cozy, comfortable cabin, and the greatest hospitality.

Some of the men formed companies before the journey and had money from investors to start their businesses. Such companies included the Long Beach and Alaska Mining and

Trading Company and the Kotzebue Commercial and Mining Company. Several companies had large river steamers, such as the *Agua E. Best* and the *Reilly*. Steamers required exceptionally skillful captains to navigate the shallow waters and sand bars of the Kobuk River.

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## WINTER ON THE RIVER

The most determined men took prospecting trips upriver and to neighboring streams early in the winter. They generally returned empty-handed. Most of the prospectors did not venture far from their winter camps.

Though many of the prospectors were able to successfully brave the winter, others did not fare as well. Some lost their outfits in the river. Others became ill with scurvy or drowned.

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## GOLD AT LAST

As winter wore on, most of the 800 miners and adventurers on the Kobuk made definite plans to leave the valley and sail south in the spring. By then, they had heard about the strike at Arvil Mountain, near Nome. However, competition for good diggings was fierce and many lost their shares to claim jumpers as gold hunters from the Klondike and elsewhere crowded the creeks outside Nome. Some were able to work the sands on the beach.

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As more prospectors entered the Seward Peninsula country, claims spread north, away from the coast. By 1901, small amounts of gold had been found on tributaries of the Imnachuk River and Candle Creek, in the area of what is now Bering Land Bridge National Preserve.

Several years later, small amounts of gold were found on several tributaries of the Kobuk. Minor mining districts developed in the Cosmos Hills and Squirrel River areas, near Kotzebue. After most miners had left for the south, a few stayed in the Cosmos Hills area, working small placer mines. By 1910, numerous claims had been staked along Klery Creek and several other tributaries of the Squirrel, though very little work was in progress.

During the winter months, the focus shifted from prospecting to recreational pursuits. Several of the camps organized lecture series and discussion groups. Zoologist Joseph Grinnell, author of the best known account of the Kobuk stampede, *Gold Hunting in Alaska*, used his time to study and collect birds.

Ice skating was a popular early winter recreational activity for the Kobuk valley prospectors. Most of the camps had at least one pair of skates. Since the conditions were especially good that year, some made skates from saw blades. Karl Knoblesdorf (right) also known as the "Flying Dutchman," pursued ice skating and snowshoe travel as an occupation, delivering mail to and from winter camps on the river for a fee.



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## "THE FLYING DUTCHMAN"

The Kotzebue Commercial and Mining Company was founded in San Francisco early in the spring of 1898 to take advantage of the reputed gold riches of the Kobuk drainage. All together, the investors raised one million dollars to fund a retail and mining business in northwest Alaska. With the money, they purchased the schooner *Charlie Hanson*, and a large river steamer for travel along the

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## KOTZEBUE COMMERCIAL & MINING COMPANY

Kobuk when they reached Kotzebue Sound. They also purchased supplies to sell to the miners in the new mining communities which they were sure would spring up near the discoveries. Most of the investors and prospectors in the company were from the San Jose, California area.



*Members of the Kotzebue Commercial and Mining Company working the beach at Nome.*

The Kotzebue Commercial and Mining Company's steamer, the *Agassiz*, was one of the largest boats to navigate the Kobuk River. This steamer carried supplies and personnel for the company. Carrington A. E. Swett served as the first mate, and W. R. Ames was the Chief Engineer. The Kobuk is a shallow river with many sand bars so the company hired a Native man to pilot the steamer for the first two trips.

The company purchased thousands of dollars' worth of supplies with the intention of operating a retail business to serve the area's miners. A company warehouse was located at the Lower Hanson Camp, about four miles down river from the confluence of the Kobuk and Hunt rivers. This camp supplied the company's mining camp farther upriver, on the Kolloksak River, where most of the company's members and the *Agassiz* wintered in 1898-1899.

# GOLD IN THE BROOKS RANGE

*The gold rush in the region that is now Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve was largely dependent on the events and circumstances surrounding the Klondike gold rush in 1897 and the Nome gold rush in 1899. Positioned geographically between the two major gold discoveries, the central Brooks Range fostered its own stampede when the Klondike waned, then lost nearly all of its miners to the Nome rush when it began.*

The discovery of gold in the Klondike inspired thousands of people to rush north. The northern goldfields were the promised lands that brought the American frontier tradition to Alaska. Tales of the Klondike, both true and false, gave birth to the popular notion that all of the north was golden, that a man had only to stake his claim and start digging and his fortune would be made.

Disillusionment quickly followed elation, as the newly arrived prospectors realized that the good claims had been staked. Also, the Canadian government levied a 10% royalty on the miners' earnings and charged import duties on their equipment. By spring of 1898, their hopes dashed on the reality of conditions in the Klondike, many miners turned downstream to American territory to renew their search for the motherlode. As the disaffected Klondikers travelled down the Yukon they spread the word to groups steaming upriver that there was nothing to be gained by going to Dawson. Some prospectors continued their headlong rush to the Klondike but many turned aside, carrying their equipment, supplies, and golden dreams up the remote rivers of interior Alaska.

The flow of miners from the Klondike to less crowded areas drove the gold rush on the Koyukuk and Kobuk rivers. By fall of 1898 people were leaving Dawson in droves and heading west to Alaska. Gold was discovered on the Koyukuk, at Bergman, and miners flocked in. Gordon Bettles opened a trading post in Bergman. When it flooded, he opened another post, which he called Bettles, upstream. Unfortunately, most of the Koyukuk gold was not accessible using the mining methods of the day and it was nearly

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## REALITY STRIKES THE KLONDIKE



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## THE GOLDEN GATES OF THE ARCTIC

impossible to extract enough to make it pay, especially in relation to the amount of effort it took to mine in such



The trading post at Bergrum on the Koyukuk River, 1900.

remote and inhospitable areas. One miner wrote home:

*Dearest, let me tell  
you my one who  
has ever gone  
prospecting for  
Gold is the hardest  
worked man a  
man ever earned,*

*for this is the most  
miserable place on  
earth.*

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## TRAPPED!

An early freeze trapped sixty-eight steamships and their nine hundred passengers in the ice of the Koyukuk River. Five hundred and fifty of them, faced with the prospect of a winter in the arctic interior, went out overland to the Yukon and the coast. The rest stayed, spending the dark cold winter in small camps along the river and purchasing supplies from Bettles on credit. One winter was enough for most of the men, and many left in the spring. Today, place names like Jimtown, Beaver City, Soos City and the remains of the steamships whisper of the stranded travelers.

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## NUGGETS ON THE KOYUKUK

Many of the remaining miners moved up the Middle Fork of the Koyukuk, searching for paying claims. Necessities were supplied by traders who brought goods and equipment at increasingly great expense up the shallow rivers. A small group of buildings at Slate Creek became Goldfoot, named for the miners who got 'cold feet' and left the country.

In 1907, several gold nuggets worth thousands of dollars were found at Nolan Creek, and trading posts and supplies moved north to Wiseman. As the Nolan boom faded, gold

was discovered farther north on the Hammond River, and so the cycle continued. Small pockets of gold were mined by men willing to endure the severe isolation and primitive conditions of the remote mountainous region.

A similar story was played out on the Kobuk River in 1898-99. The Kobuk offered even less logistical support to the miners than the Koyukuk since it was not a tributary of the relatively well-travelled Yukon.

The Kobuk stampede began when the captain of the whaling ship *Alaska* greatly exaggerated a prospector's Kobuk gold discovery to encourage people to book passage on the ship's return to Alaska. Word spread and hundreds of miners rushed to the Kobuk only to find that, as on the Koyukuk, not much gold could be extracted in paying quantity.



*Panning for gold along the Kobuk*

This, combined with a tenuous supply network and the subsequent discovery of the truly rich gold fields at Nome, resulted in a mass exodus from the Kobuk after a single year. Ironically, one of the men who came north on the *Alaska* left the ship at Port Clarence and ended up being one of the discoverers of the Nome gold fields, while his shipmates who continued on to the Kobuk found nothing.

The gold rush brought major changes to the lifestyle of the Kobuk Eskimo and Koyukon Athabascan peoples who inhabited the area and made their living through a semi-nomadic cycle of subsistence hunting and fishing. In addition to introducing new tools, materials, and foods to the Native peoples, Euroamerican goldseekers introduced a new way of life, based on wage or in-kind labour.

Native peoples trapped, hunted, and fished for miners; provided transportation for men, messages, and supplies; and saved more than a few lives by helping ill-prepared

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## KOBUK RIVER GOLD

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## NATIVE PEOPLE

prospectors out of tight spots. Following closely on the miners' heels were missionaries whose school and church teachings reinforced the changes introduced by the miners. Eskimo and Athabascan people in the region settled in villages and became largely dependent on the supplies and work opportunities of the white man's culture.



*The Walter C. Mendenthal party pulls a canoe through the riffles on their way to the Kobuk River in 1901.*

As the peak of the Gold Rush passed and the Koyukuk and Kobuk country emptied, a small number of white men remained in the interior, working claims that paid just enough for a living. They settled into an existence that was similar in many ways to the life of the Natives—trapping for

furs, hunting and fishing for wild food, and buying supplies at trading posts. These non-Native people joined the Natives in small communities, living as equals and together shaping a distinctive subsistence lifestyle that survives to the present in most interior Alaskan villages.



This booklet was written by various National Park Service historians, archeologists and interpreters. Chapter authors were Frank Norris (Klondike Gold Rush), Phyllis Motsko (Denali), John Branson (Lake Clark), Geoff Bleakley (Wrangell-St. Elias, both chapters), Cyd Martin (Yukon-Charley Rivers), Karlene Leeper (Kobuk Valley), and Cyd Martin (Gates of the Arctic). Frank Norris provided editorial guidance, and Wyndeth Davis provided the book design.

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