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Klondike Gold Rush

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1 The Klondike Gold Rush, often called the Yukon Gold Rush, was a mass exodus of prospecting migrants from their hometowns to Canadian Yukon Territory and Alaska after gold was discovered there in 1896. The idea of striking it rich led over 100,000 people from all walks of life to abandon their homes and embark on an extended, life-threatening journey across treacherous, icy valleys and harrowing rocky terrain.

2 Less than half of those who started the trek to the Yukon arrived; those who got there safely stood little chance of finding gold. While the Klondike Gold Rush invigorated the economy of the Pacific Northwest, it also devastated the local environment and had a negative impact on many Yukon Natives.

Gold Rush Alaska

3 Starting in the 1870s, prospectors trickled into the Yukon in search of gold. By 1896, around 1,500 prospectors panned for gold along the Yukon River basin—one of them was American George Carmack.

4 On August 16, 1896, Carmack, along with Jim Mason and Dawson Charlie—both Tagish First Nation members—[discovered Yukon gold](#) on Rabbit Creek (later renamed Bonanza Creek), a Klondike River tributary that ran through both Alaskan and Yukon Territory.

5 Little did they know their discovery would spur a massive gold rush.

Yukon Gold

6 Conditions in the Yukon were harsh and made communication with the outside world difficult at best. As a result, word didn't get out about the Klondike gold discovery until 1897.

7 Once it did, however, droves of people known as stampeders headed north, searching for Yukon gold and a wealthier fate. Most had no idea where they were going or what they'd face along the way.

Gold Mining Equipment

8 Canadian authorities required every stamper to have a year's worth of gold mining equipment and supplies before crossing the Canadian border such as:

- warm clothes and outerwear
- moccasins and boots
- blankets and towels
- mosquito netting
- personal care items
- medicine
- first aid items
- candles and matches
- soap
- approximately 1,000 pounds of food
- tools and mining equipment
- camping equipment

9 Getting to Yukon Territory was no easy task, especially while hauling a literal ton of supplies. For the first leg of the journey, well-stocked stampeders traveled to port cities in the Pacific Northwest and boarded boats headed north to the Alaskan town of Skagway which took them to the White Pass Trail, or Dyea which took them to the Chilkoot Trail.

Dead Horse Trail

10 The next leg of the trip was the most difficult no matter which trail a stamper chose. The White Pass was not as steep or rugged as the Chilkoot, but it was new, narrow and clogged and slippery with mud. Many animals became stuck and died, earning the trail the nickname, "The Dead Horse Trail." It's estimated 3,000 horses died on White Pass.

11 The Chilkoot Trail was steep, icy and snowy. Although pack animals were used to haul supplies for much of the stampeders' journey, once they reached Chilkoot Trail they had to abandon the animals and carry their supplies the rest of the way. This usually required making several trips up and down a frozen slope which included 1,500 steps carved of snow and ice known as the "golden staircase."

12 Daunted, many prospectors gave up at this point and headed home. One eyewitness reported, "It is impossible to give one an idea of the slowness with which things are moving. It takes a day to go four or five miles and back; it takes a dollar to do what ten cents would do at home."

13 The final leg of the journey was also treacherous and slow-going. After crossing Chilkoot or White Pass, prospectors had to build or rent boats and brave hundreds of miles of winding Yukon River rapids to reach Dawson City in the Yukon Territory, Canada, where they hoped to set up camp and stake their claims. Many people died during the river trip.

Gold Mining in Alaska

14 Only about 30,000 weary stampeders finally arrived in Dawson City. Most were gravely disappointed to learn reports of available Klondike gold were greatly exaggerated. For many, thoughts of gold and wealth had sustained them during their grueling journey. Learning they'd come so far for nothing was too much to bear and they immediately booked passage home.

15 Miners who came to the Yukon in the winter had to wait months for the ground to thaw. They set up makeshift camps in Dawson and endured the harsh winter as best they could. With so many bodies crammed into a small area and sanitary facilities lacking, sickness, disease and death from infectious illness were commonplace.

16 Other people stayed in Dawson and attempted to mine gold—they usually came up empty-handed. But instead of returning home, they took advantage of Dawson's booming infrastructure and worked in or opened saloons, supply stores, banks, brothels and restaurants. Most of the town's merchants made their fortunes off the never-ending supply of miners arriving consumed with gold fever.

The Effects of the Gold Rush

17 Although the discovery of Yukon gold made a few lucky miners rich beyond their wildest dreams, many people made their fortunes off the backs of the miners chasing those dreams. Even so, the adventurous stampede for gold united people of all walks of life in a common goal.

18 The influx of people to Dawson turned it into a legitimate city. It also led to a population boom in Yukon Territory, Alberta, British Columbia and Vancouver. The Klondike Gold Rush is credited for helping the United States out of a depression. Still, it had a horrific impact on the local environment, causing massive soil erosion, water contamination, deforestation and loss of native wildlife, among other things.

19 The gold rush also severely impacted the Native people. While some made money off miners by working as guides and helping haul supplies, they also fell victim to new diseases such as smallpox and the introduction of casual drinking and drunkenness. The population of some Natives such as the Han declined rapidly as their hunting and fishing grounds were ruined.

Klondike Gold Rush Ends

20 The Klondike Gold Rush slowed by the end of 1898 as word got out there was little gold left to be had. Countless miners had already left Yukon Territory penniless, leaving gold-mining cities such as Dawson and Skagway in rapid decline.

21 The Klondike Gold Rush ended in 1899 with the discovery of gold in Nome, [Alaska](#). The find reignited the pipe dreams of many dejected miners who quickly forgot the hardships they'd just endured and couldn't wait to set out on a new adventure.

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