

“With a heart of gold”: Women’s Agency During the Klondike Gold Rush

Logan Vance

After the discovery of gold in present-day Yukon Territory in Northern Canada, a stampede of thousands of people raced to the Klondike region to seek fortune and adventure. While the era was a short one — taking place between 1897 to around 1902 — the Klondike Gold Rush was filled with excitement and prosperity, lending itself to national myths in both Canada and the United States of America. The discovery of gold was first made in August of 1896 by George Carmack, an American prospector, as well as Keith “Skookum Jim” Mason and Káa Goox (otherwise known as Dawson Charlie), who were both members of the Tagish First Nation. Once word spread about their findings, approximately tens of thousands of people started to flock to the region in hopes of finding their own wealth. Due to the explosion of activity in the area, Dawson City was established in 1896 and the Yukon Territory was officially created in 1898.ⁱ It is estimated that roughly twenty-nine million dollarsⁱⁱ worth of gold was uncovered in the region during the Klondike Gold Rush.ⁱⁱⁱ

Of those who rushed to the Klondike, the stories of women have been the most neglected. When their experiences are recounted, they are usually filled with stereotypes — either framing the women as prostitutes or as wives confined to the private sphere — or they are told based on the women’s connections to men.^{iv} However, in actuality, most women made the voyage to the Klondike with the exact same intentions as men: to seek out economic prosperity and social opportunity.^v As more research is being conducted by feminist scholars, the real experiences of women are being unearthed. As Carolyn Moore explains, new narratives of the Gold Rush “reveal the lived experiences of women in the Klondike to have transcended these stereotypes.”^{vi} Jennifer Duncan’s work has uncovered that the women who participated in the Gold Rush were “extraordinary in their courage, independence, and craving for adventure.”^{vii} Duncan explains

that there was a great interest in the Gold Rush amongst late eighteenth century women as it provided an opportunity “to escape the confines of Victorian propriety and the prison of the domestic sphere.”^{viii}

The values and beliefs of the Victorian era oppressed women in many different ways: they were not seen as “persons,” they were relegated to the private sphere, and they were in charge of all domestic forms of labour, such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the children. It was a woman’s duty to be a good wife, a good mother, and a figure of morality. They were confined to the private sphere — one would rarely see a woman out in public without a male escort — therefore, they were unable to leave the home to gain employment or to seek adventure.^{ix} Thus, the Gold Rush was an opportunity for emancipation from their oppressive lifestyles and to prove what women were capable of.^x

The majority of women who participated in the Klondike Gold Rush did not actually work as miners and prospectors. In fact, only around 1% of women truly took part in mining for gold.^{xi} However, those who did were able to express a certain amount of agency by defying the standards set for women in the Victorian era. During this time period, women were not even allowed to work and were oppressed by Victorian society’s values that confined them to the private sphere. Therefore, by going out on their own, working, and making their own money, they were rebelling against

Ethel Berry (standing with arms crossed) at one of her family sluices. 1899. From “Two Women of the Klondike” by Mary E. Hitchcock. Accessed January 26, 2018. <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/gold/women.html>.



the norm and expressing agency. Additionally, mining required a lot of physical strength, which was not thought of at the time as a trait that women possessed. Therefore, by participating in the gruelling work that mining required, these women were expressing agency.

One woman who struck her own fortune was Ethel Berry. She travelled to the Klondike with her husband in search of fortune, crossing the frightening and dreadful Chilkoot Pass during her honeymoon. She started panning for gold once she arrived in the Klondike and ended up collected \$70,000 worth of gold nuggets all by herself.^{xii} While her whole family worked as miners and prospectors, Berry still worked independently and was able to gain wealth by her own actions. By doing so, she expressed agency, defying the norms that Victorian society set for women.

Even though very few women worked as miners and prospectors, there were plenty of other ways for women to assert agency. Many women owned and operated their own businesses during the Klondike Gold Rush. Despite the fact that the market was incredibly competitive in Dawson City, a small but driven set of women made their mark on Dawson's business sector.^{xiii} By 1901, eight clothing and hat shops, two hotels,^{xiv} eleven lodging houses, and seven restaurants, cafés, and lunch counters were owned, operated, and managed by women.^{xv} Another popular business venture for women was the operation of roadhouses, and it was greatly considered throughout the Klondike region that women were more adept in their management than men.^{xvi}

Many stories of women-owned businesses are starting to surface in the narrative of the Klondike Gold Rush. Take for example the case of Mary Anderson. She arrived in Dawson City in 1899 by herself after leaving her unstable marriage. Anderson opened her own clothing shop, which operated successfully for four years until the end of the Gold Rush.^{xvii} Not only was An-

derson able to gain employment (a rarity for women during the Victorian era), but she owned her own business. By doing so, and by separating from her husband (which was also uncommon during this time period), she was able to express agency and independence.

Another business-owner in Dawson City was Lucille Hunter, a 19-year-old African-American woman who travelled to the Klondike with her husband and her new-born child (whom she gave birth to en route in the middle of the winter).^{xviii} During the Gold Rush, she owned and operated three gold mines and one silver mine in and around Dawson City all by herself.^{xix} Not only was the operation of several mines an amazing feat for a Victorian woman, Hunter was able to express more agency as she was of a racial minority. She was able to defy standards that were set for her gender and well as her ethnicity.

Lillian Taylor also owned and operated her own business during the Klondike Gold Rush. She was described as an independent single woman who lived in Dawson City and Whitehorse between 1898 and 1904.^{xx} She took advantage of the many economic opportunities posed by the Klondike Gold Rush. Taylor was “an unconventional woman living a non-traditional lifestyle”^{xxi} who “had a number of business partners and seemed to be very adept at juggling several business deals at the same time.”^{xxii} The majority of men whom she traded with and sold mining plots to rarely made comments about her femininity.^{xxiii} She was seen as an equal player in her business ventures, allowing her to express agency and defy the standards set for her by Victorian society.

Finally, Lotta “Lottie” Burns partook in the Klondike Gold Rush in Dawson City’s economic sector, who was described as “an unabashed opportunist”^{xxiv} and a “hard-headed businesswoman.”^{xxv} Burns was tired of her daily life and routine, so she travelled to Dawson to find fortune so she could support her sick mother in Montreal. She conducted business in Dawson

City by buying mining claims at extremely low prices from men who were in debt and selling them for a higher value. This led her to make a lot of money,^{xxvi} allowing her to support her mother and express agency at the same time.

All of these women were incredibly independent, were able to make their own choices, created their own path in life, and worked hard for their own wealth despite restrictive societal values and stereotypes placed upon them. During this time period, it was rare for a woman to be working. However, by travelling to the Klondike, women could express independence and have ownership of their own business. Regardless of the stereotypes surrounding women in the folklore of the Klondike Gold Rush, the reality is that women were agents in their own stories and where able to express independence by running their own businesses.

While owning and operating a business was a common way for women to express agency during the Klondike Gold Rush, other women were able to be agential by being purely adventurous (which was in no way a part of the Victorian values that were expected of women). Therefore, by trying new things and having new experiences, these women were able to express agency. For example, Mary Hitchcock and Edith van Buren made their way to the Klondike and crossed the treacherous Chilkoot Pass with “an ice cream machine, a magic lantern, a zither, a mandolin... a score of live pigeons, two canaries, a parrot, and two Great Dane[s].”^{xxvii} What they did with all of these things once they arrived in the Klondike is unknown; however, they were known to be fun and adventurous, and therefore asserted agency during the Klondike Gold Rush by defying social expectations.

Another woman who was able to express agency through adventure was Grace Bartsch, who travelled to the Klondike with her husband. She was described as “an independent woman

with a sense of adventure”^{xxviii} who would often abandon her husband in search of fun activities. For example, she would pursue her curiosity by leaving her husband behind on their way to the Klondike and hitch a ride on a raft with another man.^{xxix} By going off on her own — or in the company of people she hardly knew — and participating in activities that were not categorized at the time as a “woman’s” activity, Bartsch was able to express agency by going against societal norms and being independent.

However, mining, owning a business, or being adventurous were not the exclusive ways for women to express agency during the Klondike Gold Rush. Even the women who fell into one of the aforementioned stereotypical categories could assert agency in their positions. Women who worked as entertainers and sex workers could express agency by working in the public sphere and making their own wages. As a result, they were expressing independence and making



Mary Hitchcock & Edith Van Buren posing aboard ship with their dogs, Queen and Ivan. 1899, Special Collections Division, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington. Accessed January 26, 2018. <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/gold/women.html>.

their own decisions about their lives, as well as defying the societal norms of the Victorian era. For example, Mae Fields ran a “house of ill repute” in Dawson City while supplementing her income as a prostitute.^{xxx} Even though working as a prostitute was one of the stereotypes about women in the Gold Rush, Fields as well as other sex workers asserted agency in their lives by earning an income all by themselves.

Another example of a woman who worked in the entertainment industry in Dawson City is Maud Parrish. She travelled to Dawson after the death of her two-month-old baby, leaving behind a wealthy husband and a respectable family. Once in Dawson, she gained employment at a dancehall. However, she would outwit her customers and trick them into paying her more money, thus gaining a small fortune.^{xxxi} By using her intelligence to deceive customers, Parrish was expressing agency. Her non-conformative actions and defiance of the prostitute stereotype allowed her to carve her own path in life.

If one considers the fact that, under normal circumstances during this time period, women were not allowed to work and earn their own wages, then the amount of money that women in the Klondike’s entertainment industry were able to make is impressive and can be considered as evidence of how they expressed agency. It has been concluded that women who worked in the entertainment and sex industries in the Gold Rush “were paid higher than male white-collar workers.”^{xxxii} The cost of living in the Klondike was around \$6 per day. The minimum wages of male labourers was \$8 per day, and the average salary for female housekeepers and domestic labourers was \$12 per week. In contrast, dance halls girls earned \$40 per week, as well as 25% commission for every drink she could tempt customers to buy; musicians made \$20 per day; actresses, regardless their talent, would make \$150 per week and 25% commission on every drink

she could sell; prostitutes could easily make \$300 per week.^{xxxiii} Despite the fact that working as a prostitute was a stereotype that was attached to women who participated in the Klondike Gold Rush, it is still noteworthy that by working and earning their own wages — which were significantly higher than the cost of living of the time period — these women were able to express agency and were able to defy the norms that were pushed on to them by the Victorian society.

However, what cannot be ignored in the narrative of the Klondike Gold Rush are the experiences of Indigenous women. Unfortunately, due to several circumstances, Indigenous women were much more marginalized during this time period than white women were, and therefore were unable to express as much agency during the Gold Rush. However, I still thought it important to include their experiences, which are most frequently excluded from the narrative of the Klondike Gold Rush. This exclusion has happened for two reasons — Indigenous women during this era faced oppression based not only on their gender but on their race as well. During the Gold Rush, there was a hierarchy of social classes that was established in Dawson City in which Indigenous women, in particular, “were of the very bottom rung of the social ladder.”^{xxxiv} While white women still faced oppressive societal values, the privilege that their skin colour gained them allowed them to exert more freedom in the Klondike and to have more agency in their lives. Since Indigenous women were the lowest on the social ladder, one can conclude that they had little to no opportunities to express agency and act independently.

The second reason is due to the Indigenous traditions of knowledge sharing, which is based on oral histories. It is a possibility that there are plenty of stories of Indigenous women who were able to express agency during the Klondike Gold Rush, but would not be known in our Western-thinking society due to the fact that it is a part of Indigenous culture to share knowledge

and stories via oral history.^{xxxv} Especially during this time period, it was not a part of the Indigenous way of life to write things down and document them. Therefore, if there are stories of Indigenous women exerting agency, the majority of them are not known because they were not documented in a way that was deemed “acceptable” by the Western European mode of thought.

However, during my research, I was able to find a few accounts of Indigenous women participating in the Klondike Gold Rush. These women were considered to be essential in helping to establish relationships between the Indigenous communities and the white newcomers who had travelled north for the Gold Rush.^{xxxvi} They were also important companions to male miners and prospectors who helped them survive in the harsh Northern climates. As Lindsay Roberts explains, they “provided company for [the male miners], facilitated connections and collaborations with their local peoples, possessed hunting and trapping skills essential to living in the area, and could harvest, tan and sew hide clothing necessary for the men to survive in the north.”^{xxxvii} The Tlingit women in particular worked “as packers for the prospectors... carrying supplies and, equipment”^{xxxviii} for the men who employed them. Due to Indigenous women’s valuable survival skills that were crucial in the cold climate of the Klondike, they “had important leadership roles as guides and interpreters.”^{xxxix}

In a way, these women were able to express a certain amount of agency, but perhaps not as much as white women were able to. It is unknown whether or not these women were paid for the labour in helping the miners and prospectors; however, since they were at the bottom of the social ladder in the Klondike, having a form of employment in the public sphere, side by side with white men — who were at the top of the social ladder — can be considered to be asserting some amount of agency. Additionally, it is clear that these women were considered to be impor-

tant in some areas of the Klondike Gold Rush, as they took on leadership roles in community-to-community relationship building. While white women were able to express much more agency in their participation in the Klondike Gold Rush, it is important to note that the known stories of Indigenous women's participation show that they asserted whatever agency they could. It is also important to keep in mind that due to the oral histories of Indigenous communities, there could be many more stories of Indigenous women expressing independence and agency during the Gold Rush that are unknown at the moment.

The Klondike Gold Rush, which lasted roughly between 1897 to 1902, is a historical narrative that is told almost exclusively about the male participants. In both Canada and the United States, the folklore and myths that surround the Gold Rush are stories that depict masculinity, heroism, adventure, and survival. However, what is more uncommonly recounted is the experiences of women during this time period and the agency they were able to assert in leading their own lives, especially considering the restrictive values and norms of the Victorian society, as well as the stereotypes that haunt women's participation in the Gold Rush. These stereotypes fall into two categories — a prostitute who is either a "whore with a heart of gold" or an "evil seductress" — or a domestic, stay-at-home wife of a gold miner. While many of the lived experiences of the women who participated in the Klondike Gold Rush adhered to these stereotypes, many others were able to exert agency, even in the smallest of ways. Usually, the amount of independence and control a woman could exercise in her life depended on her ethnicity and her status in the social hierarchy in Dawson City. Nonetheless, any amount of agency a woman could show was better than none, especially when one considers the oppressive forces that women faced at

this time. One can hope that more information is uncovered about the lived experiences of women during the Klondike Gold Rush, especially those of Indigenous women

Notes

ⁱ Michael Gates, “Klondike Gold Rush,” The Canadian Encyclopedia, last modified March 4, 2015, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/klondike-gold-rush/>.

ⁱⁱ Figure unadjusted. Gates, “Klondike Gold Rush.”

ⁱⁱⁱ Gates, “Klondike Gold Rush.”

^{iv} Moore, “Crisis and Opportunity.”

^v Frances Backhouse, *Women of the Klondike* (North Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada: Whitecap Books Ltd., 1995).

^{vi} Moore, “Crisis and Opportunity.”

^{vii} Jennifer Duncan, *Frontier Spirit: The Brave Women of the Klondike* (Canada: Anchor Canada, 2004), 4.

^{viii} Duncan, *Frontier Spirit*, 4.

^{ix} Martha Vicinus, *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1980) 5.

^x Duncan, *Frontier Spirit*, 5.

^{xi} Charlene Porslid, *Gamblers and Dreamers: Women, Men, and Community in the Klondike*, ed. Camilla Jenkins (Canada: UBC Press, 1998).

^{xii} Duncan, *Frontier Spirit*, 2.

^{xiii} Porslid, *Gamblers and Dreamers*.

^{xiv} Porslid, *Gamblers and Dreamers*.

^{xv} Porslid, *Gamblers and Dreamers*.

^{xvi} Backhouse, *Women of the Klondike*.

^{xvii} Porslid, *Gamblers and Dreamers*.

^{xviii} Duncan, *Frontier Spirit*, 1.

^{xix} Duncan, *Frontier Spirit*, 2.

^{xx} Moore, “Crisis and Opportunity.”

^{xxi} Moore, “Crisis and Opportunity.”

^{xxii} Moore, “Crisis and Opportunity.”

^{xxiii} Moore, “Crisis and Opportunity.”

xxiv Lael Morgan, *Good Time Girls of the Alaska-Yukon Gold Rush*, ed. Christine Ummel (Alaska: Epicenter Press, Inc., 1999) 30.

xxv Morgan, *Good Time Girls of the Alaska-Yukon Gold Rush*, 31.

xxvi Morgan, *Good Time Girls of the Alaska-Yukon Gold Rush*, 31.

xxvii Duncan, *Frontier Spirit*, 2-3.

xxviii Moore, “Crisis and Opportunity.”

xxix Moore, “Crisis and Opportunity.”

xxx Duncan, *Frontier Spirit*, 3.

xxxi Morgan, *Good Time Girls of the Alaska-Yukon Gold Rush*, 34.

xxxii Porslid, *Gamblers and Dreamers*.

xxxiii Morgan, *Good Time Girls of the Alaska-Yukon Gold Rush*, 48.

xxxiv Lindsay Roberts, “Gold Rush Girls: Newcomer and Native Women’s Relationships during Yukon’s Gold Rush” (diss., February 4, 2012) 5.

xxxv Roberts, “Gold Rush Girls,” 15.

xxxvi Roberts, “Gold Rush Girls,” 4.

xxxvii Roberts, “Gold Rush Girls,” 4.

xxxviii Backhouse, *Women of the Klondike*.

xxxix “Women of the Klondike,” ExploreNorth, Ken Spotswood, last modified 2009, http://www.explorenorth.com/library/yafeatures/klondike_women.html.

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