

# Public Memory and Public Holidays: The Goldpanner, Corporate Capital, Tourism and Yukon's Discovery Day Holiday

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## Introduction

The Yukon territory in northwestern Canada is fertile ground for a historian. Cloaked in the romance of the Klondike Gold Rush of a century ago and just coming to terms with the significant cultural implications of the First Nation land claims finally being settled, the population of the territory is groping for a way to describe itself. Complicating the equation is a series of major changes over the last hundred years that affect how people define themselves and connect themselves to the place they call home. This paper reviews the history of some of the Territory's icons and public events to gain an insight into the processes of cultural heritage commemoration.<sup>1</sup>

Early on a Friday night in late November, 1989 Morris Byblow, the Yukon government's Minister for Community and Transportation Services, and license plates, wandered into the T&M Tavern in downtown Whitehorse, where the news media regularly drop by for a brew. In an impromptu fashion he announced that the Territory's license plate was going to be changed. The territorial flower the fireweed and the shadowy profile of a mountain range with the words "The Magic, The Mystery", co-incidentally the terms applied to the new territorial tourism marketing strategy, were to replace the Gold Panner and "The Klondike". Christmas was forgotten as Byblow reaped a whirlwind of public opposition. "Save the Goldpanner" was on lips and petitions across the Territory for the next three months until the Government backed down and promised to retain the Goldpanner.<sup>2</sup>

In the Yukon, we regularly have public conflicts over history, or rather over the public's selective memory and creation of a past. By studying this difference, by comparing the dynamic record of history with the public's memory through a review of the identifying icons of the Yukon, this paper hopes to illuminate significant changes to the community's mechanisms of social and cultural reproduction as Yukoners strive to ensure that their values and identity are carried forward into the future. That is, to close, at least a little, the gap between history and public memory.<sup>3</sup>



Contemporary Yukon  
license plate. (PC)

The Sourdough goldpanner showing a pair of Cheechakos (newly arrived miners) the mysteries of placer mining. (Glenbow-Alberta Institute NA-2426-10)



In order to determine what this gap is and how it is created it is important to define both history and public memory. The past is a large place and presumably it was all true. We select only portions from it to create the present and what we chose and how we decide to change it obviously are of central importance. Lewis Wolpert recently noted, "Reliable knowledge is value free, the moral issues arise only in relation to how this information is used."<sup>4</sup>

In this light we can define **History** as those pieces of the past that we use in the consideration and presentation of contemporary social values. History sets up a model for society to strive towards and assesses our success in reaching for this model. **Public Memory** in contrast, is the popular understanding of history, generally selective to avoid challenging dominant values and institutions or, to forward, specific contemporary political goals.<sup>5</sup>

In the Yukon, the primary public icons of the newcomer identity have revolved around the Klondike Gold Rush of 1896-1900. They are epitomized by the ubiquitous goldpanner and centre on the celebration of Discovery Day, the 17th of August. How were these selected and what meanings do they hold for Yukoners today?

### **Establishing an Identity - The Goldpanner**

The Klondike Gold Rush was a mass movement of people to a remote, from the western world's perspective, location in the central Yukon. The gold rush created a community there of about 30,000 Stampeders. Although well over 20,000 of these were Canadian and American citizens, more than two-thirds were recent immigrants to their adopted countries. These newcomers remained a distinct and quite separate body from the indigenous population of the Yukon estimated at approximately 5,000 people.<sup>6</sup>

This new gold mining community of the Yukon was set in a challenging and isolated environment. Not surprisingly the group

sought to establish an identity - some sense of community and attachment to place.<sup>7</sup> This community identity was constructed on a number of common elements.

1. A shared race - Although diverse in national origin, the bulk of the Stampeders population was northern European in origin, sharing a Christian background. They also carried a strong belief in material progress - a necessary prerequisite for participation in a gold rush.



**Above:** Stampeders launching their boats on the way to Dawson, Chilkoot Trail, May 30, 1898. (Yukon Archives, Roozeboom Coll./6275)

**Left:** Roman Catholics at Dominion Creek in the Klondike goldfields celebrate St. Jean Baptiste Day, June 24, 1904. (PC, Anita Johns Coll./280)

2. A shared experience of entry - The extraordinary journey of the Stampeders to the Klondike, up the Pacific coast, through the rugged mountain trails of the Coastal ranges and down the Yukon River, was an experience which stayed with them for their lives. Even those who left the North, maintained close ties through Yukoner associations.

3. A shared economic activity - The community of Dawson City existed for one reason, mining placer gold. Everyone there was either a miner in the goldfields or working in the supporting infrastructure - government, banking, transportation or services.

4. A shared annual round of work - Mining was by hand labour and involved sinking shafts to the "paydirt". To avoid flooding, all work was done in winter and by spring large piles of gold bearing gravel were ready to be "washed up" using the spring run off. "Clean-up", sluicing out the gold, was usually completed in June and all the miners were paid out of the winter's take. This was also about the time the first river steamers, carrying fresh supplies and liquor, made it to Dawson after a long, cold winter. It was time for a holiday.



**Above:** Grand Forks, a mining town in the Klondike goldfields, decorated for the July 1 and 4 holiday, 1904. (PC, Anita Johns Coll./291)

**Below:** Miner and family at their home in the creeks. (PC, Anita Johns Coll./254)



The primary holiday of the Gold Rush was a week long festival of mining success centred on the Canadian and American national holidays, July 1 and July 4. Although imported from the south, this joint patriotic and nationalistic holiday played an important role in submerging the many different cultural and social identities making up the Stampeder society and building on the shared race and annual round of work. However, as these imported identities faded and different forces shaped the newcomer society in the Yukon, a locally

created identity built on the original journey in and the shared economic activity was developed.

It was the importation of outside elements that was most important in establishing and shaping the newcomer identity. The Yukon Order of Pioneers, the YOOPs, a mutual-aid society originally limited to those whites who were in the Yukon before 1888, was established in 1894 as a reaction to the many new miners coming in. They established themselves as the "leaders" of the newcomer community and maintained this role for much of the following

century.<sup>8</sup> For the rest of the newcomer society it took a little longer and the importation of corporate capital to similarly inspire the creation of an icon-based identity and a new public holiday.

The newcomer society in the Yukon was built on an entrepreneurial dream of independent freeholders developing natural resources and getting rich - similar to the agricultural settlement of both the Canadian and American west. The regulations governing size and holding of placer claims re-inforced this ideal - if a miner was off his claim longer than 72 hours it was legally open for re-staking, and the size of claims, supposedly geared to a man's capacity to work it, varied with the Government's perception of the richness of claims. However, there was more to placer gold than just working the ground - you needed water. And water in the dry continental interior of the Yukon is hard to come by and have in the right place.

The import of capital for investment in mechanical mining equipment early in the century allowed some significant changes to the annual work schedule. Mechanization and especially the application of water pumps, allowed digging to take place year round. Activity slowed only in late summer when the water supply was low. The nationalist holidays of early summer holidays lost their importance. Everyone was too busy working. As mining techniques were upgraded through the application of steam power and the expansion of summer open pit mining, the shortage of water became the bottleneck in production.

Since the water supply in the Klondike was limited, the miners worked to develop a large-scale water supply and management scheme. They called upon the government to capitalize the project. At the same time corporations began serious investments in the Yukon, building upon the existing mining infrastructure and purchasing large groups of claims to work them more effectively with huge dredges. They too began making plans to invest large sums of money in water management. The government deferred to the corporate initiatives with significant consequences for the idea of independent freehold society in the north.

Through the first decade of the century there was increasing vocal opposition to the "monopoly" practices of the vertically integrated corporations by the independent miners. The local population felt they were being robbed of their birthright, of control of the society they had built in the wilderness. The corporations, geared towards the economic maximization of the available resources, waited upon, as one mining magnate opined, "the simple forces of supply and demand to determine which mining system would



The Discovery Day parade is usually led by a Mountie, followed by the YOOPs and then other community groups of Dawson. (PC)



The Palace Grand Theatre in Dawson.  
(JH Bell, Dexter Co.)

prevail." In the colonial periphery of the western world, the primacy of supply and demand soon solved the question.

With dreams of independent freehold transformed into a reality as wage-earning proletariat, the local population sought a new way of carrying their dream. In 1911, the YOOPs persuaded the local government to make August 17 a territorial holiday to commemorate Discovery Day, the day the Klondike gold discovery was made. Discovery Day was a significantly different event than the turn of the century gold clean-up celebration of success. Discovery Day was a remembrance of the entrepreneurial spirit and ideals of individualism that had driven the first prospectors "over the Trail" into the Yukon.<sup>9</sup> The goldpanner was thus ensconced as the icon of the Yukon.

### **New Tensions, Reviving the Icon**

Through the teens, twenties and thirties the social identity of the Yukon remained relatively stable. It was not until the startling transformations of the mid-1940s and 1950s that there was any real change in the social identity of the newcomer community. These changes were driven by a series of externally driven events.

The construction of the Alaska Highway during the war integrated the Yukon on two levels - first, there was the more direct connection to the outside world ending isolation, and second, the highway and expanding road network started to break down the old separation between newcomers and Yukon First Nations.

Postwar inflation in the west made serious inroads into Canadian gold mining as costs escalated while the price of gold remained fixed at \$35/oz. Yukon companies started closing down their operations. The active business community in the Klondike began looking for economic alternatives - the rising demand for urban recreation of the 1950s made tourism an obvious choice for the north.

Finally Canadians once again looked to their north. By the mid-1950s, there was increasing interest and investment in the north as it appeared to be the future of Canada. A new "gold rush", marked by massive development of northern resources, defence initiatives and southern immigration into the north, was spurred on by government support.

In the Yukon this revival played out in several ways. While mining remained an important player in northern development there was a conscious and concerted effort to diversify the northern economy. This generally focused on tourism.

In 1952 a Dawson City community organization set itself up as a tourist association. They offered visitors tours of the town by guides in old clothes and an evening dance. This activity evolved into the Klondike Visitor's Association (KVA) that remains today as the single largest, and most effective, group in selling "the Klondike" to visitors.

As part of this expanding tourist marketing the goldpanner was added to the Yukon license plate in 1956. A territorial Dept. of Tourism was created about five years later. Pierre Berton's best selling book, **Klondike**, was released in 1958, adding fuel to the gold rush fervour, both in the revival of the original version as a tourist event

and the initiation of the second new version of development.

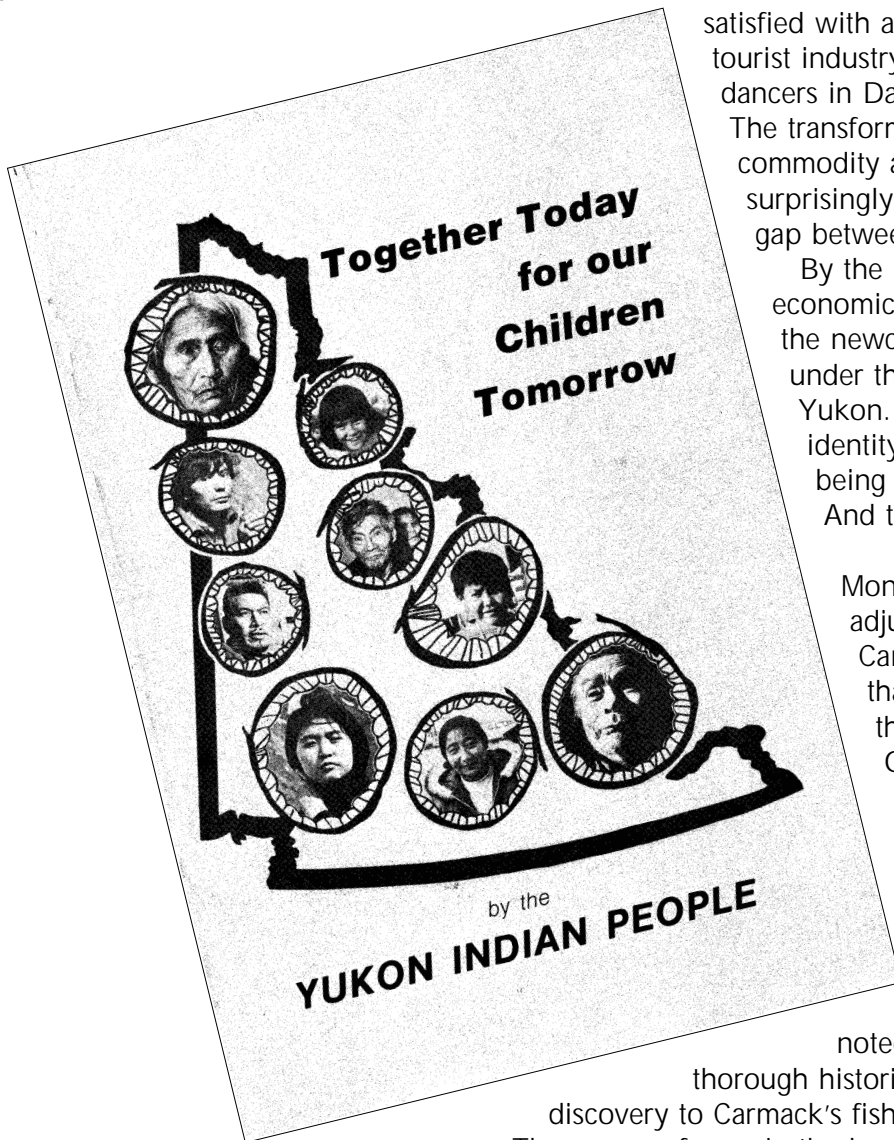
The Canadian Department of National Resources and Northern Development also contributed. In 1959 Dawson was recognized as a National Historical Complex, and the Federal Government invested heavily in the restoration of buildings, riverboats and gold rush history. The kickoff for this program was the Government initiated 1962 Dawson Festival. This summer long extravaganza featured the newly-rebuilt Palace Grand Theatre and a specially commissioned off-Broadway production, Foxy.

By the mid-1960s, this new northern rush was underway with a boom in base metal mining and the rise of a tourism industry.<sup>10</sup> The goldpanner was adopted as the symbol for this new rush but, instead of portraying the individual freehold dreams of old, he now spoke to the daring pioneer who, together with government and large companies, wrestled with an intractable Mother Nature to gain wealth. It was a subtle shift, but in a booming Yukon economy no longer solely dependent upon gold mining nor populated only by gold miners, it was important.

The absorption of the goldpanner into the tourism industry was immediate and seemed a perfect fit. When the KVA found that its folksy tours, skits and evening dances were not drawing the tourists in sufficient numbers, they added the racy cancan dancers to the pantheon of acts, and icons, representing the Yukon. In the case of the Cancan dancer however, a line had been crossed. No longer

Cancan dancers entertain  
visitors in Whitehorse, 1960s.  
(PC, Commercial slide)





Delivered to the Federal Government in December, 1972, this document became the basis for the negotiation of the Yukon First Nation Umbrella Final Agreement.

satisfied with appropriating existing social icons, the tourist industry fabricated one - there were no Cancan dancers in Dawson during the Klondike Gold Rush. The transformation of history, identity and icon to commodity appears to have been complete. Not surprisingly, there was an associated and growing gap between history and public memory.

By the 1960s, the shared nature of entry, economic activity and annual round of work of the newcomer community had disintegrated under the stress of changes introduced to the Yukon. The only founding element of the identity constructed earlier in the century still being represented by the goldpanner was race. And this was soon under attack.

In 1972 the Federal Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, the adjudicator of commemorative intent for Canada's National Historic Sites, announced that it was replacing the plaque honouring the discovery of Gold in the Klondike. Originally placed in 1930, the Board had uneasily trod the patriotic line of who actually discovered the gold by placing on the plaque, the names of both the American, George Carmacks, who filed the discovery claim and the Canadian, Robert Henderson, who told him where to look. The new plaque still

noted both men but, on the basis of thorough historic research, assigned the credit for discovery to Carmack's fishing partner, Keish, a Tagish Indian. There was a furore in the local white community as they complained that the Federal Government was taking over, and changing, their history.<sup>11</sup>

Another more important initiative affecting Yukon identity was the release of the Federal Government's **White Paper** in 1969. The **White Paper** proposed that the special status of Aboriginal People under the Indian Act be rescinded and that Canada's Indians join into the mainstream national population. This proposal also led to an uproar in the Yukon - this time among the Aboriginal population. Their response to the **White Paper** was to prepare their own position paper, **Together Today for our Children Tomorrow - A Statement of Grievances and an Approach to Settlement by the Yukon Indian People**. In 1973 the Federal Government accepted this document as the basis for negotiating a comprehensive land claims agreement. Also noteworthy the Government accepted the Aboriginal people's intent to establish a co-operative government model for both cultures in the Yukon.<sup>12</sup> As Roddy Blackjack, an Elder from the Pelly First Nation, declared "Time for us to walk together, hand in hand."

After twenty years of often acrimonious negotiations, the Yukon First Nations and the Federal and Territorial Governments



signed off the Umbrella Final Agreement. Among the many areas addressed by this agreement was heritage. One of the main terms of "Chapter 13 - Heritage" is what has become known as the "catch-up and keep up" clause.<sup>13</sup> With this term both Governments accepted an obligation to invest resources into Yukon aboriginal cultural heritage until this investment equals the huge amounts poured into the commemoration of the Klondike Gold Rush and to commit to equal investments between the newcomer and aboriginal cultures once parity is reached.

Today Yukoners are busy constructing a new public identity, a new public memory. The goldpanner and the, by now irreplaceable, cancan dancer, remain as important marketable commodities. And the goldpanner retains real meaning for the small number of Yukon families who use it as a personal link back to the gold rush. However the arbiters of Yukon history have changed. The public importance of the YOOP, the founding organization of the commemorative Discovery Day holiday, has eroded over the last fifty years. This was emphasized in a decision by the Supreme Court of Canada in 1996. In a human rights case revolving around membership for women, the Court found that the organization did not offer or provide services to the public in "the collection and distribution of historical material....[or] confere benefits and important public status on its members." In fact the YOOPs no longer played a role in determining either values or identity for the larger community.<sup>14</sup>

This year Yukoners are celebrating the centennial of the Klondike Gold Rush. And while the Stampeder and Discovery Day will be prominent in the tourist events, they share the stage with the Yukon Anniversary Commission's icon, Dalton, a seven and half foot tall Dall Sheep in top hat and tails. Maybe Dalton isn't the answer, but he is distinctly Yukon. There is an acknowledgement within the Yukon that we need to find more common ground, more shared values, to represent the cultures living together in the Yukon.

## Notes

1. This paper draws inspiration and guidance from both Martha Norkunas, **The Politics of Public Memory: Tourism, History and Ethnicity in Monterey, California** (State University of New York, 1989) and Brent Slobodin, "Panning the Rush: Images of the Klondike Gold Rush in Contemporary Yukon Society", **The Northern Review** (forthcoming).
2. Practically every issue of the **Whitehorse Star** and **Yukon News** from late November, 1989 through February, 1990.
3. Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions", in E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, ed., **The Invention of Tradition** (Cambridge, 1983)
4. Lewis Wolpert, Review of Runciman, **The Social Animal**", **The Guardian Weekly**, Vol. 158, No. 15, Ap 12/98 p. 28 .
5. Michael Frish "The Memory of History", **Presenting the Past - Essays on History and the Public** (Philadelphia, 1986).
6. Canada, **Sessional Papers 1894**, Annual Report of the NWMP, Charles Constantine Report pon the Yukon for 1894.
7. Kammen, **Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture** (New York, 1991) p.4. Hobsbawm also describes the

creation of social identity as an important element bringing stability to a community undergoing rapid change or establishment. Hobsbawm, "Introduction", p.2.

8. Hobsbawm, "Introduction", p.10-11.

9. The term was used by the YOOPs to describe their membership initiation procedures. **Dawson Daily News** Aug. 17, 1911.

10. K. Coates and W. Morrison, **Land of the Midnight Sun - A History of the Yukon** (Edmonton, 1988) p. 271.

11. Personal communication with Gordon Bennett, Parks Canada Historian, Ottawa.

12. C. McClellan, **Part of the Land, Part of the Water: A History of the Yukon Indians** (Vancouver, 1987) p.95, 101-102 and D. Neufeld, "Trampled in the Rush", **Legion Magazine**, Ja/Fe/1998, p. 25.

13. Council for Yukon Indians, **Umbrella Final Agreement between The Government of Canada, The Council for Yukon Indians and the Government of the Yukon** (Ottawa, 1993).

Term 13.4.1 of the Agreement states: "As the Heritage Resources of Yukon Indian People are underdeveloped relative to non-Indian Heritage Resources, priority in the allocation of Government program resources available from time to time for Yukon Heritage Resources development and management shall, where practicable, be given to the development and management of Heritage Resources of Yukon Indian People, until an equitable distribution of program is achieved."

Term 13.4.2 adds: "Once an equitable distribution of program resources is achieved, Heritage Resources of Yukon Indian People shall continue to be allocated an equitable portion of Government program resources allocated from time to time for Yukon Heritage Resources development and management."

14. [1996] 1 S.C.R., **Gould v. Yukon Order of Pioneers**, 571, Yukon Human Rights Commission and Madeleine Gould **Appellants v. Yukon Order of Pioneers, Dawson Lodge Number 1 and Walter Groner Respondents** and Yukon Status of Women Council **Intervener** Indexed as: **Gould v. Yukon Order of Pioneers** File No.:23584. 1995:October 3; 1996:March 21. Background on the case provided by Heather MacFadgen, Director, Yukon Human Rights Commission and Jan Langford, Yukon Status of Women Committee.