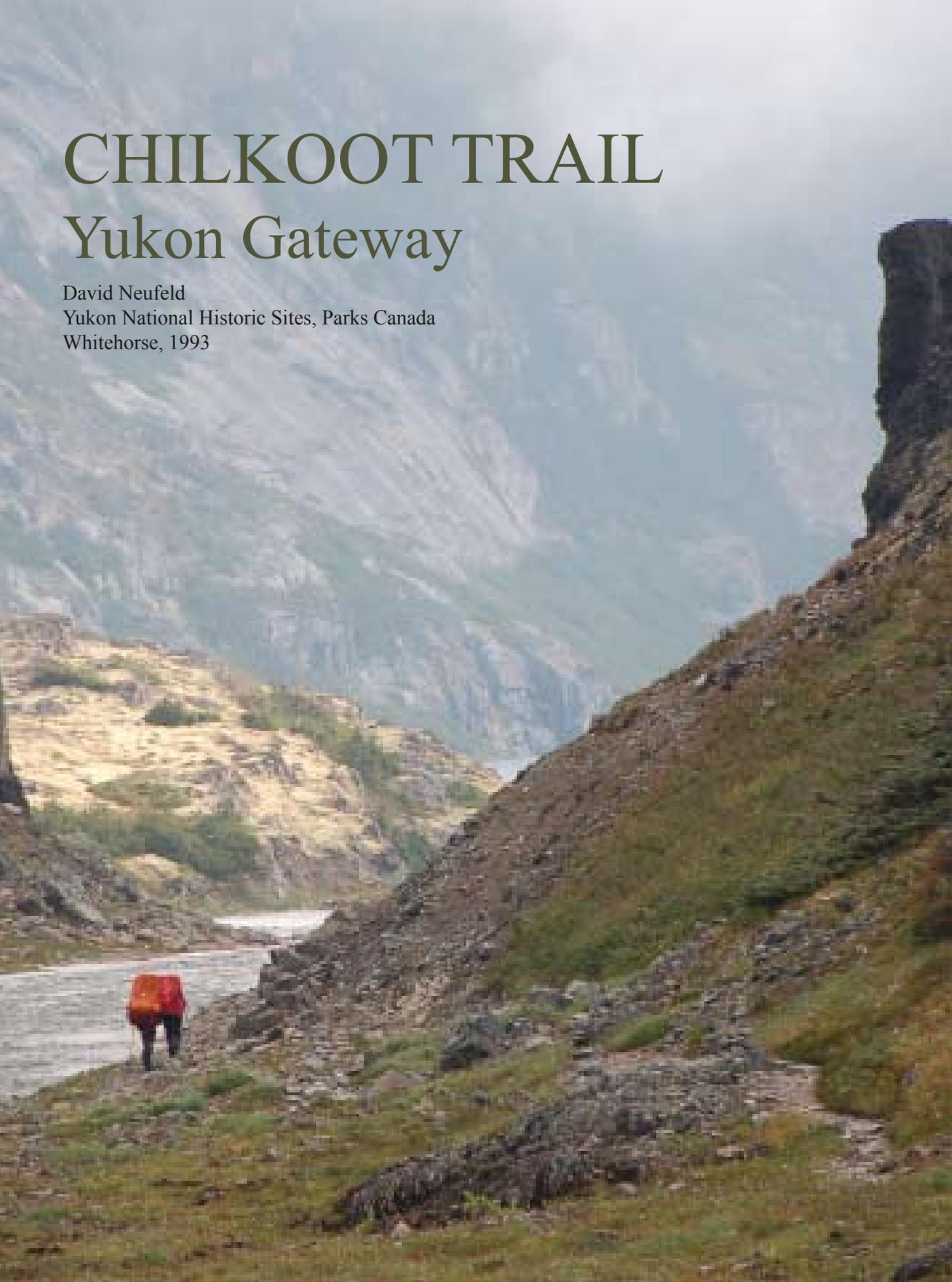


# CHILKOOT TRAIL

## Yukon Gateway

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Yukon National Historic Sites, Parks Canada  
Whitehorse, 1993



# One-Way Traffic

## Boating on the Chilkoot

Water transport was the central feature of Yukon communications until the 1950s. The large boats that steamed up and down the Yukon River system are represented at present by the MV *Tarahne* preserved at Atlin, British Columbia, and in the Yukon by the SS *Klondike* in Whitehorse and the SS *Keno* in Dawson City. The steamboats that carried the freight, mail, and people of the Yukon communities through the 20th century are remembered. However the smaller boats and rafts that carried people into the country in the early days are not. They were particularly important along the Chilkoot route.

The system of lakes and streams within the boundaries of the Chilkoot Trail National

Historic Site is one of the head-waters of the Yukon River and an important part of the water route to the interior. First Nation people and gold rush stampeders both made use of boats and rafts as they moved along the Chilkoot route.

### Aboriginal Craft

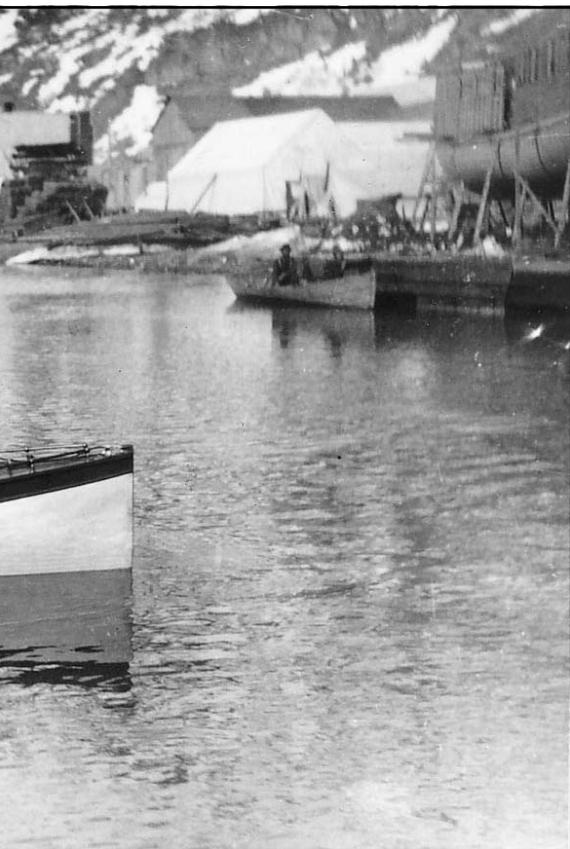
Native trade patterns in the period before the Klondike Stampede included travel through the different mountain passes of the area, including the Chilkoot Pass.<sup>1</sup> Large trading expeditions into the interior, up to 100 people, generally carried quantities of high value goods such as Chilkat blankets



The first naptha launch  
on Lake Bennett.  
(YA 4647)

and baskets. By the 1880s, cloth, kettles, knives, coffee, and flour, among other 'whiteman's goods', were also carried in. Furs and both tanned and untanned skins were brought out. These trading trips to the interior generally took place in February, when the hard spring snow made for fast trips, and early summer.<sup>2</sup>

During the summer, Indians traveling into the interior generally made use of boats on Lake Lindeman. According to Arthur Krause, who accompanied a group of Tlingit as far as Lake Lindeman in 1882, the Indians stored durable dugout canoes near Moose Creek, where the trail reached the lake.<sup>3</sup> These craft were about three metres in length and made from trees about a metre in diameter. They were generally hollowed out by alternating small fires with adze work to hack out the charred wood. Once the sides were about 25mm thick the canoe was filled with water. Stones heated in a fire, were thrown in, the sides forced apart with thwarts,



and seats added. Such a canoe would take about ten days to complete and usually seated four or five people.<sup>4</sup> When not in use these craft were stored in cool damp areas, *under a willow bush* according to Schwatka, to prevent their drying out and cracking.<sup>5</sup>

Frederick Schwatka's large exploration party, trekking through the Chilkoot in 1883, included two *Tahk-heesh* or 'Stick Indians' who used canoes on Lake Lindeman. *These (unwieldy dilapidated "dug-outs") are made of a species of poplar, and are generally called "cottonwood canoes"; and as the trees from which they are made are not very large, the material "runs out" so to speak, along the waist or middle of the canoe, where a greater quantity is required to reach around, and this deficiency is made up by substituting batten-like strips of thin wood tacked or sewed on as gunwales, and calking the crevices well with gum. At bow and stern some rude attempt is made to warp them into canoe lines, and in doing this many cracks are developed, all of which are smeared with spruce gum. The thin bottom is a perfect gridiron of slits, all closed with gum, and the proportion of gum increases with the canoe's age.*<sup>6</sup>

First Nation people rarely moved along rivers. Most of their travel routes were on ridge tops and they crossed watersheds rather than travelling down them. Early visitors to the Yukon therefore saw few Indigenous people. (Atlin Hist. Society P-177)

Skin boats, usually moosehide, were also used by First Nations in the area. One account describes a fleet of walrus-hide *umiak* like boats kept at the head of Lake Bennett. Obtained from the Tlingit of Yakutat, these vessels carried coastal trading parties down the lake to Tagish villages.<sup>7</sup>

Native canoes were lightly built and required skilled use. Designed for personal mobility and fishing, the canoes were never intended as freighters. First Nation travel in summer was usually done on trails across watersheds and did not follow the rivers. Further they generally travelled without a great deal of baggage. When seen by newcomers carrying vast quantities of supplies and who tended to stick to rivers, the local canoes appeared practically useless. This perception however, merely reflects the very different travel routes and requirements of First Nations and the newcomers.<sup>8</sup>

### Miner's Craft

Before the major gold strike at the Forty Mile River in 1887, miners and prospectors working the Yukon basin usually left the area for the winter. Freight for the area came up river from St. Michaels on vessels like the *Youkon* (brought north in 1869) and the *St. Michael* (steamed as far as Selkirk in 1871).<sup>9</sup> Most miners, anxious to work as late in the season as possible, chose to pole their way upstream and hike out through the Chilkoot Pass. In 1887 George Dawson noted that *quite a number of boats have been left here (south end of Bennett Lake) by parties (of miners) 'doubling up' for the last stage over the pass.*<sup>10</sup> More easily constructed rafts were favoured by the miners and explorers passing through the area. Schwatka's raft built at Lindeman was an especially imposing one.

*The best logs available, which were rather small ones of stunted spruce and contorted pine, had been floated down the little stream and had been tracked up and down along the shores of the lake, and a raft made up of the somewhat formidable dimensions of fifteen by thirty feet, with an elevated deck amidships. The rope lashings used on the loads of the Indian packers were*

*put to duty in binding the logs together, but the greatest reliance was placed in stout wooden pins which united them by auger holes bored through both, the logs being cut or "saddled out" where they joined, as is done at the corners of log cabins. A deck was made on the corduroy plan of light seasoned pine poles, and high enough to prevent ordinary sized waves from wetting the effects, while a pole was rigged by mortising it into one of the central logs at the bottom and supporting it by four guy ropes from the top, and from this was suspended a wall tent as a sail, the ridge pole being the yard arm, with tackling to raise and lower it. A large bow and stern oar with which to do the steering completed the rude craft.*<sup>11</sup>

The most numerous vessels, of course, were those constructed by the Stampeders between 1897 and 1899 for their run down the Yukon River to Dawson. Of a wide variety of shapes, sizes, and styles these vessels carried each Stampeder party and



Busy waterfront at Lindeman in 1898. One of the sawmills is at the left rear. (BCA HP-69657)



their goods, which might weigh up to four tonnes. One Stampeder's account of the scene at Lindeman emphasizes the importance of this boat building.

*I was prepared for a busy scene, but certainly nothing to equal what was before me. It almost baffles description. All along the shore and to some distance up the side*

The King's Mill near Bennett, Sept. 3, 1898. (BCA HP33921)





1898 April 25 - Must admit that a whipsaw is a man-killer. I know our saw does not run right. We only have 9 boards + have been sawing 3 days. We work like clockwork and do not seem to do anything. My back is most broken.  
 April 26 - Flewing came to our rescue and filed the darned old saw and she runs like a charm. I will ever have a warm place in my heart for him.  
 - Louie B. May  
 (UAF, Olive Joslyn Bell Coll. 79-41-271N)

*hills, boat-building was being carried on with quite feverish activity, and the sound of a steam saw-mill, whipsaws, and hammering and planing, resounded on all sides. Boats there were in all imaginable shapes and sizes, from big unwieldy barges to tiny craft that reminded one of the paper boat dear to childhood. It was, indeed, a wonderful sight. Many of the boats were constructed with great skill, and were evidently the production of practical boat-builders, whilst others were little better than flat open boxes fitted with thwarts and thole-pins.... Apart from these home-made craft, there were Peterborough and Strickland canoes, steel boats built in*

*sections, collapsible boats, punts, and, in fact, almost anything fit for the long river journey... The animation of the scene can be more easily imagined than described.*<sup>12</sup>

Lumber for these boats was highly prized. A few of the Stampeders hauled planks and boards over the Chilkoot Pass for their boats. Tappan Adney, a newspaper reporter, describes his venture: *A dozen packers take my outfit across the pass to Crater Lake, but will not touch the boat lumber. Flour is a packer's first choice, lumber last.*<sup>13</sup> Most, however, used local timber for their boats. Many Stampeders cut their own trees and erected saw pits and whipsaw frames to saw the trees into planks.

Walter Starr's party set up their boat building camp on the shores of Tagish Lake in early April, 1898. They immediately began felling the stand of fine fir trees there. On the 14th they built a saw pit and began sawing boards. Others in the party continued *snaking in logs*. The next four weeks consisted of the same tasks, interrupted only by search for more *good trees*, Sundays, and an unsuccessful hunting trip. One week of practise and the party established their own record, *sawing a log into five boards twenty four feet long in two hours*. After three weeks, however, familiarity bred carelessness and on Monday, April 26, Starr *took a dive off the scaffold while marking a log to vary the monotony and escaped with only a bruised knee and some lost breath*. The next day, a log rolled off the scaffold and hit Gil on the head. *Luckily his skull is very thick, and he was only stunned for a while.*

On May 2 two of the party began assembling the boat. The others looked after the food supply and continued to haul in additional logs and whipsaw them into boards. By mid-May, *all hands are anxious to get going down the lake so we work twelve or thirteen hours a day.... Bowman and I caulk the seams in the boats. Billy made sails and Gil oars. The pitch to cover the seams gave out but I collected enough in the woods to make out. The lake is opening along the shore. Our boat is a beauty, twenty seven feet in length, from four to six feet wide and with three foot sides. Her capacity is three tons. With her natural bow stem and fine lines I*

## SCOWS

*Freight scows were made of two inch planking, 42 feet long, and 12 feet wide, with straight sides. They were square at both ends, but sheered up like a barge, with pointed outriggers run-ning about eight feet at the bow and stern, and a long heavy sweep at the end. They were decked fore and aft for eight feet, with the middle open, and a plank around the sides to walk on.*

*Each scow had a mast about twenty feet high, rigged with a square sail. The mast was set about eight feet back of the bow, so that a man could work the sweep in front of it. Sails were used only when crossing the lakes. Usually a tent was placed over the cockpit in the middle. After the cargo was loaded, this was where the crew lived, cooking on a little sheet iron stove. The scows were unpainted, were capable of carrying 20 tons, and drew from 24 to 26 inches.<sup>17</sup>*

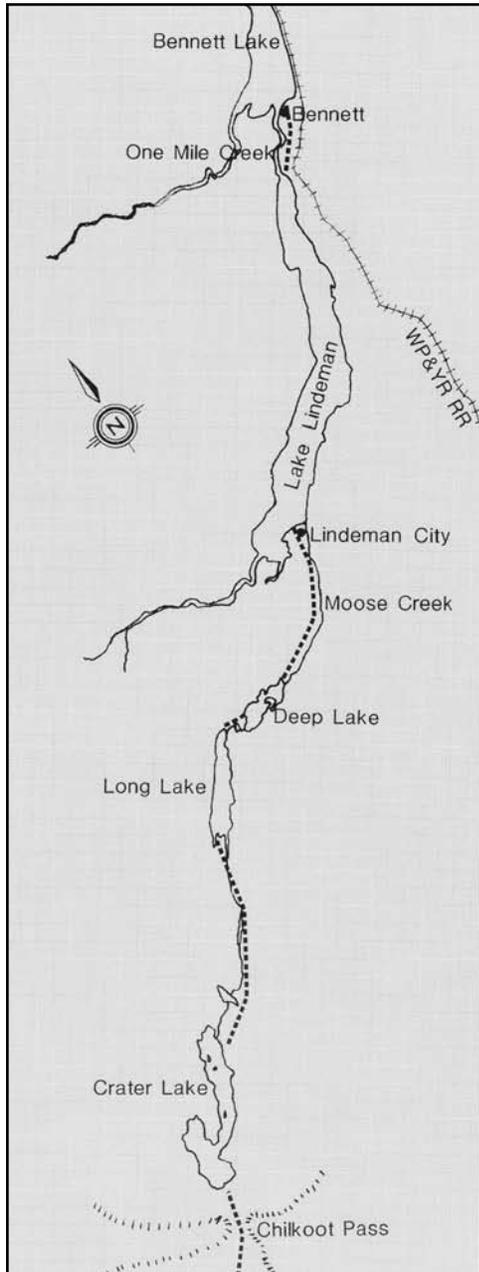


**The large amounts of timber required for these vessels, as well as for fuel and building construction, denuded long stretches of the shores along both Lakes Lindeman and Bennett, significantly altering the landscape.**

Floating down the river  
(ASL PCA 232-248)

Banging together boats at  
Lindeman  
(YA 1185)





Map of the Chilkoot waterways.

*dare say she is a peer of all boats on the lakes, handmade... (On May 20) about fifteen of us carried our boat and the Whalley's party two scows to the lake shore and launched them. I made a grub chest for our boat... (The next day we) loaded our camp and outfit in the boat. Bowman went through the ice and Billy pulled him out.<sup>14</sup>*

Boat builders along the Homan River. (NAC C4688)

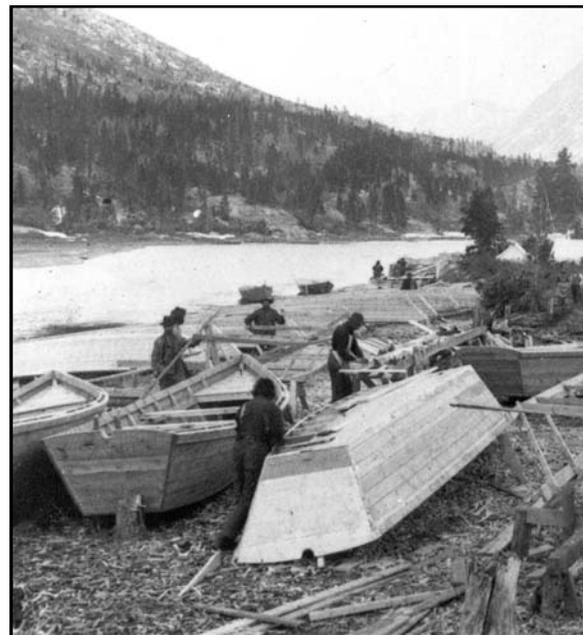
In May 1898 the NWMP counted 778 boats under construction along Lake

Lindeman, 850 in and around Bennett, and a further 198 being built at Caribou Crossing and Tagish Lake. Inspector Steele estimated another 1200 boats were built in the three weeks following.<sup>15</sup>

The extraordinary market for boats soon attracted several commercial manufacturers. The first operation arrived in 1896 from Juneau. Rudolph, Markus, and Rocco brought in a two-horsepower engine and boiler over the Chilkoot and set up a 14 inch saw at Bennett. During the sudden rush in 1897 the mill was short of supplies but the partners were *coining money*. A sawmill was set up in Lindeman the same year and it operated for at least two seasons. Another, King's Mill, started up near Bennett. It ran for two years before being moved to Carcross.<sup>16</sup> These mills made boats and scows for Stampeders.

### Commercial Boat Services

A complex series of freight services developed to meet the great demand for the transfer of goods over the Pass during the stampede. In the summer months when the lakes were open, a combination of wagons, packhorses, and boats carried goods to Lindeman and Bennett. In winter



arrangements were much simpler. During the spring breakup and fall freezeup freight traffic was effectively halted.

The very difficult terrain and uneven ground from the summit to Lindeman made for a rough passage. A crude trail was prepared from the summit northwards. Packhorses and wagons connected boat services on Crater, Long, Deep, and Lindeman Lakes. These services were offered as early as the fall of 1897.

*(At) Crater Lake, a body of pure green water, of irregular outline, a mile or more in length, lying in a great, rough, crater-like basin of rock.... (there are three boatmen) ferrying goods to the foot of the lake at 1 cent a pound. Forty dollars a day was paid for the use of one rowboat, but the men are making more than that....*

*(A few days later) the ferry man at Long Lake refuses to go out in the storm, so we pay him full price, 1 cent a pound, for his boat, a large double-ender, load our goods in it, rig a small square-sail in the bow, and scud to the other end, leaving the owner to get his boat when the storm eases up. A portage of a few hundred yards to Deep Lake, and another ferryman takes us to the foot, a mile distant, where we set up our tent.<sup>18</sup>*



These commercial ferry services on the upper lakes continued through 1898. They profited from the through transportation system established by the Chilkoot tramway companies that spring. The Johnson family boat service and restaurant at Crater Lake operated through the summer of 1898. Arriving early in the year Johnson found his small knock-down boat was in demand for freighting. He spent the next three months at Crater Lake and made a hundred dollars a day. At the same time his wife broke open their supplies and baked pies for the passing horde. Late in the season Johnson sold his boat and the family continued on to Dawson.<sup>19</sup>

Lake Lindeman boat services during the rush were on a grander scale. Several commercial vessels plied the lake hauling freight and passengers. In May 1898 the *Lindeman*, a 20 foot by 40 foot stern-wheeler with a 40 ton capacity, began carrying freight from Lindeman to Bennett. For a dollar you could ride down the lake to the Bennett portage.<sup>20</sup> The *Lindeman* worked Lake Lindeman for the summer but was moved into Lake Bennett later in the year. In 1899 the vessel hit a rock in Whitehorse Rapids and sank, a total loss.<sup>21</sup>

Boat services at Crater Lake in Sept, 1898. (UW, Hegg #464)



(UAF, #67-17-28)  
 From Crater Lake freight was packed over a rough wagon road to the end of Long Lake. Shipped across to the Deep lake camp it was once again transferred to horses.  
 (YA, Charmin Coll.)

Three launches, probably gasoline powered, also sailed Lake Lindeman in 1898. The *Alert*, *Madox*, and *Lily C.* only carried passengers up and down the lake. A small boat named the *Alert* ran between Juneau and Dyea up to 1897 and maybe the same *Alert* carried over the pass to Lindeman.<sup>22</sup> After a season on Lake Lindeman the launches were

sailed to Atlin Lake for the gold rush there. They carried travellers over the lakes from the end of the Fantail Trail.<sup>23</sup>

Boat transportation during the gold rush was essentially one-way traffic. Everyone headed down river after breakup. From Lake Lindeman boats had to run the treacherous rapids of the One Mile River to reach Bennett Lake. A United States Geological Survey party described lining the rapids in the spring of 1896.

*(We) began the task of "lining" (the boat) down. With a long pole shod with iron, especially brought along for such work, Pete stood in the bow or stern as the emergency called for, planting the pole on the rocks which stuck out of the water and so shoving and steering the boat through an open narrow channel, while we three held a long line and scrambled along the bank or waded in the shallow water. We had put on long rubber boots reaching to the hip and strapped to our belts, so at first our wading was not uncomfortable. On account of the roar of the water we could not hear Pete's orders, but could see his signals to "haul in", or "let her go ahead". On one difficult little*



*place he manouvered quite awhile, getting stuck on a rock, signalling us to pull back, and then trying again. Finally he struck the right channel, and motioned energetically to us to go ahead. We spurted forward, waddling clumsily, and the foremost man stepped suddenly into a groove where the water was above his waist. Ugh! It was icy, but he floundered through, half swimming, half wadding, dragging his great water-filled boots behind him like iron weights; and the rest followed. We felt quite triumphant and heroic when we emerged, deeming this something of a trial: we did not know that the time would come when it would become so monotonous that all feelings of novelty would be lost in a general neutral tint of bad temper and rheumatism.*<sup>24</sup>

High water in the spring of 1898 made the run through this stretch fairly easy, though several scows were wrecked. In the first week of June the police noted the loss of about ten scows in the rapids.<sup>25</sup> One entrepreneur, Paterson, applied to the British Columbia government for a charter to manage navigation through the creek the same spring. He wanted to improve navigation in the creek and asked for permission to charge a toll of one-quarter cent per pound of freight. While waiting for his charter he blasted several large rocks out of the creek, creating an easier route through the rapids. However, his charter application was never acknowledged and his plans to charge a toll were thwarted by the Mounted Police.<sup>26</sup>

By the summer season of 1899, with the White Pass and Yukon Railway offering train service to Bennett, the Chilkoot route was effectively shutdown for commercial traffic. Only the odd foot traveller passed through. The boat services on the upper lakes, always limited to fairly small craft, disappeared.

Commercial boat service from Bennett continued for a few years. From the time the first Stampede broke their winter camp in the spring of 1898 to the summer of 1900 Bennett was an important transshipment centre. Several steamers were constructed and operated on the lakes and upper Yukon River. Docks and warehouses were erected



Today (Wednesday, June 1, 1898) there are many boats going down the (One Mile) River. Some of them go through the canyon safely, but many have a dangerous ride. I saw one of them run into a large rock and be broken into two pieces. Another one capsized and went under the water with all its cargo. However, no one was drowned.  
- Inga Sjolseth (Kolloen)  
(ASL PCA 41-177)

at the mouth of the One Mile River for several different shipping companies. After the completion of the railway to Bennett in July, 1899, another large dock was built by the tracks to serve the transshipment of freight and passengers from the trains to the boats. However, Bennett lost its importance quickly after the completion of the railway to Whitehorse on July 30, 1900.

The completion of the railway effectively ended the use of the Chilkoot Trail. However, beyond the railway, water transport was the major carrier and river-borne traffic remained central to the Yukon for another half century.



The Australian under construction at Bennett, May 19, 1899. (YA 3575)

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> C. McClellan, My Old People Say (Ottawa, 1975) p. 5 summarizes the trade routes.
- <sup>2</sup> McClellan, pp. 504-505.
- <sup>3</sup> A. Krause, Journey to the Tlingets by Aurel and Arthur Krause 1881/82, trans. M.K. McCaffrey (Haines, 1981) p. 62.
- <sup>4</sup> McClellan, p. 270, and F.W. Waugh,

“Canadian Aboriginal Canoes”, *The Canadian Field Naturalist*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (May, 1919) p. 32.

<sup>5</sup> F. Schwatka, A Summer in Alaska (St. Louis, 1893) p. 91. McClellan notes one informant who stated that sawn lumber boats rapidly supplanted the dugouts *because they didn't have to look after them so good*. McClellan, p. 270.

<sup>6</sup> Schwatka, pp. 200 and 91-92.

<sup>7</sup> R.L. Olson, “Some Trading Customs of the Chilkat Tlingit”, Essays in Honour of Alfred Louis Kroeber ed. R.H. Louie (Berkeley, 1936), p. 214. McClellan offers more information on skin boats, pp. 268-270.

<sup>8</sup> J. Cruikshank, Dan Dha Ts'edeninth'e Reading Voices - Oral and Written Interpretations of the Yukon's Past (Vancouver, 1991) p. 110.

<sup>9</sup> H.A. Innes, Settlement and the Mining Frontier (Toronto, 1936) p. 182.

<sup>10</sup> McGill University Archives, MG 1022 C.82 No.59, G.M. Dawson Private Diary - 1887, Vol.1 No.16, September and Vol.2 No.19, September.

<sup>11</sup> Schwatka, p. 96.

<sup>12</sup> J.M. Price, From Euston to Klondike (London, 1898) pp. 107-111.

<sup>13</sup> T. Adney, The Klondike Stampede of 1897-



Bennett was built up along the waterfront where goods could be easily transferred from the trail to boats heading down river. (BCA HP61193)

1898 (New York, 1900) p. 110.

<sup>14</sup> W. Starr, My Adventures in the Klondike and Alaska 1898-1900 (n.p., 1960) pp. 10-16.

<sup>15</sup> NAC, RG 18 A1 Vol.154, f.445-98, Tagish Report for May, 1898.

<sup>16</sup> E. Hazard Wells, Magnificence and Misery (Garden City, 1984) pp. 43-47 describes the Rudolph mill at Bennett. Alaska *Searchlight* May 2 and July 11, 1896 note the partners' progress in the set-up of their mill. Saw-mills are visible in photos of both Lindeman and Bennett during this period. Dr. E.O. Crewe, Gold Fields of the Yukon and How to Get There (Chicago, 1897) p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> A. T. Walden, A Dog-Puncher on the Yukon (Montreal, 1928) p. 196.

<sup>18</sup> Adney, pp. 115 and 119.

<sup>19</sup> W.B. Haskell, Two Years in the Alaskan and Klondike Gold Fields (Hartford, 1898) pp. 474-475.

<sup>20</sup> Price, p. 113.

<sup>21</sup> Tagish Reports for May and June, 1898 and Canada, Sessional Papers, No.15, North West Mounted Police Reports for 1899, pt.II, Yukon Territory, p. 14.

<sup>22</sup> J.H.E. Secretan, To Klondyke and Back (London, 1898) pp. 32-34.

<sup>23</sup> Tagish Report for June, 1898.

<sup>24</sup> Josiah Edward Spurr, Through the Yukon Gold Diggings - A Narrative of Personal Travel (Boston, 1900) pp. 69-70.

<sup>25</sup> Tagish Report for July, 1898. Price also describes the rapids and evidence of scow wrecks on this creek, pp. 116-118.

<sup>26</sup> Tagish Report for May, 1898.

The Clifford Sifton, Bailey and another vessel waiting at the White Pass and Yukon docks to load passengers and freight for Whitehorse. (BCA HP27089)

