RESEARCH BULLETIN

No. 305 May 1994

Bennett City: a Gold Rush Phenomenon

David Hems and Peter Nieuwhof
Archaeological Services
Prairie & Northern Region

Introduction

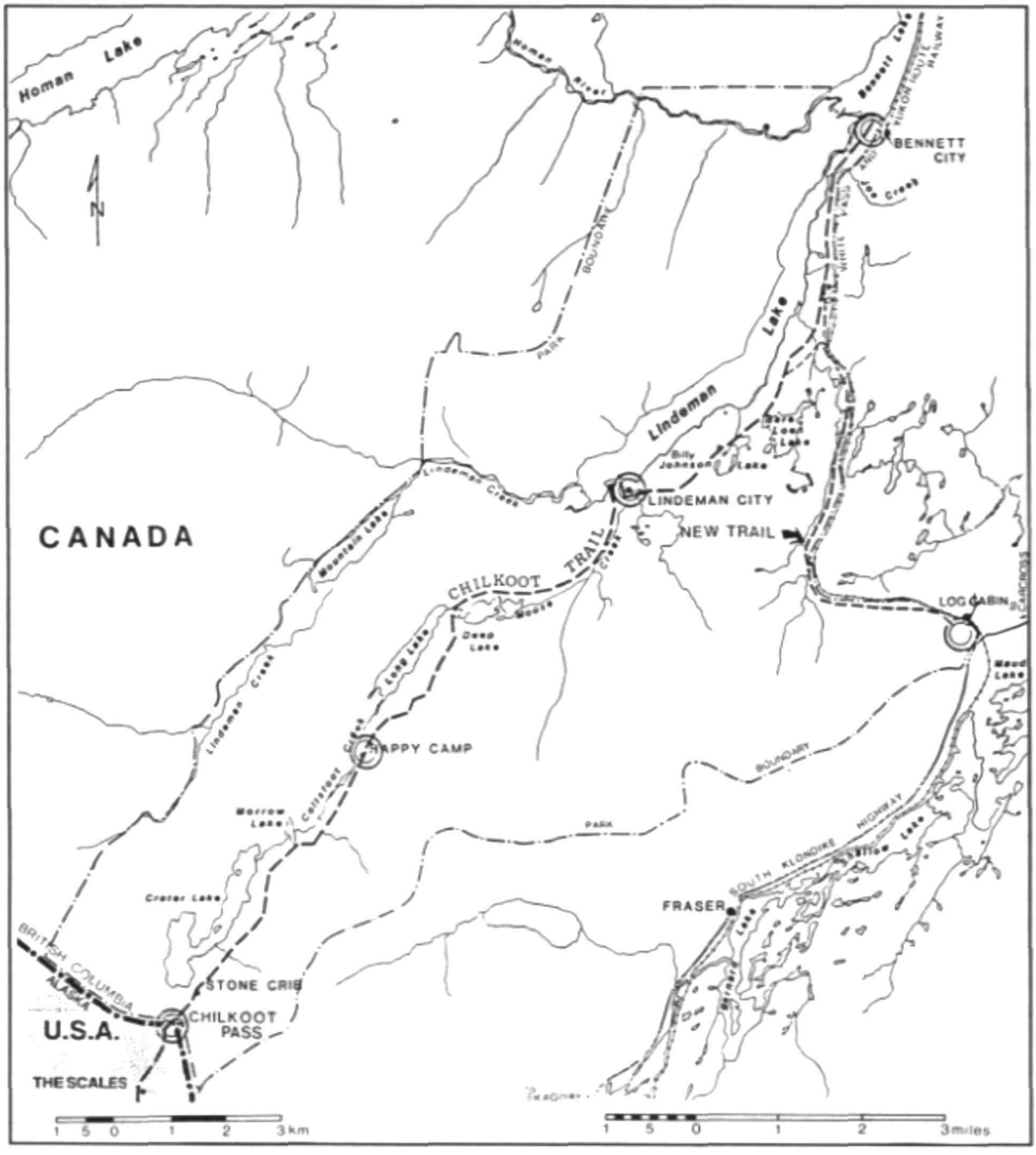
The Bennett City archaeological site is the terminus for both the Chilkoot and White Pass trails and is located on a narrow strip of land between Lindeman and Bennett lakes (Fig. 1). The core of the site is situated at the most northern end of this area, with the more peripheral areas situated to the south. The townsite covers the area from the north shore of Lake Lindeman to the south shore of Lake Bennett, and is also situated on both banks of Lindeman Creek. Parks Canada research has focused on the east side, which covers the area between Lindeman Creek and the roadbed of the White Pass and Yukon Railway (Fig. 2).

Bennett began as a large semipermanent encampment. During the winter of 1897-98, stampeders constructed boats and prepared themselves for the spring break-up and the continuation of their journey to Dawson City. Bennett's location at the convergence of the Chilkoot and White Pass trails led to its development as the largest temporary tent community of its time. Once the wave of gold seekers disappeared in the spring of 1898, Bennett became the transshipment centre for goods moving to the gold fields. It was also the head of steam navigation on the upper reaches of the Yukon River, and a number of sternwheelers were constructed there. In 1899 the White Pass and Yukon Railway company completed its railroad as far as Bennett, which remained the terminus until final completion of the railroad to Whitehorse in 1900. After this, Bennett began to diminish in importance and was eventually abandoned.

The general terrain around Bennett is rolling and rugged. The town itself was constructed on a hillside which slopes steeply upward from Lake Bennett (Fig. 3). The unstable sandy soil and thin vegetation cover on the slope contributes to erosion and the creation of sand dunes. These very conditions led to the need for terraces and the construction of retaining walls to support the terraces in order to both create and maximize space for the town's inhabitants.

Through careful observation, it is possible to see the legacy of the gold rush period at Bennett City. The present landscape has been produced by the town's various inhabitants, which during its peak consisted of upwards of 20 000 stampeders and entrepreneurs, building and then living in temporary quarters while en route to the gold fields. Evidence of road construction and community organization still exist, and residents often carved space into the hillside or extended platforms out over the water for homes and businesses. This evidence can be seen with a little imagination when viewing the terrain and vegetation. Unfortunately, indications of past land use can be easily damaged by camping, hiking and other visitor activities. Present land

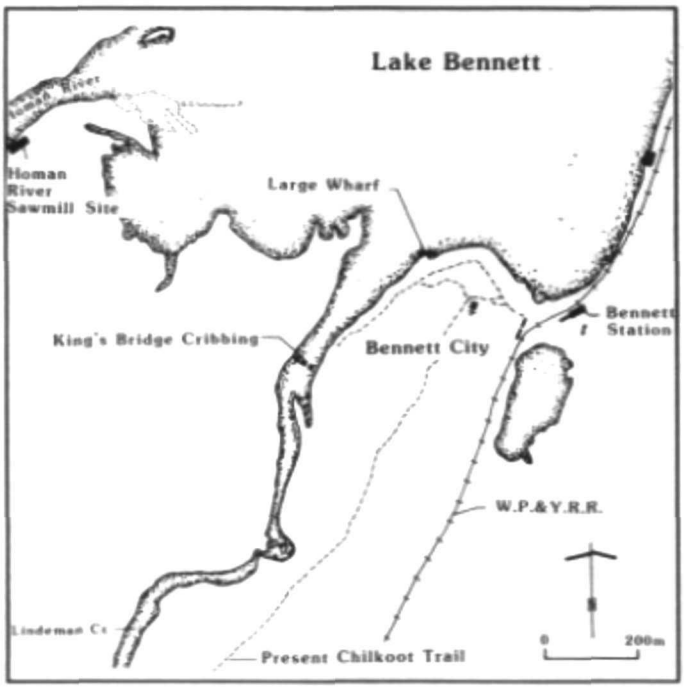
CANADIAN HERITAGE PATRIMOINE CANADIEN
Parks Canada Parcs Canada
Cette publication est disponible en français.



1 Bennett City archaeological site at the convergence of the White Pass and Chilkoot trails.
Map by B. Stewart

users must be aware of what the cultural resources represent, how distinctive they are, and what actions each visitor can take to ensure evidence of past human activity is not destroyed.

The landscape and vegetative modification seen at Bennett forms a significant link between the past and the present. It helps us understand the ways in which humans have interacted with the cultural and physical environment. These past links assist in understanding our present situation and provide insights to the future. Damaging or removing archaeological remains erases the traces which bind us to the past.



2 Detail of Bennett City site with Homan Sawmill site location and the White Pass and Yukon Railroad tracks and station. Drawn by D. Elrick

Evidence of the Legacy of the Gold Rush

Historical and archaeological research has recorded a variety of remains at Bennett. Some of the remains are quite substantive and others are almost invisible, but even the most subtle evidence reveals something about the past. In order to enhance the individual's experience on the Chilkoot, it is important to take time for quiet observation, reflection and use of the imagination when viewing these archaeological remains.

Tent Platforms

The generally sloping terrain at Bennett meant that most of the tent platforms had to be carved into the hillside. The excavated soil would then be deposited on the opposite end of the platform to produce a level area. This naturally created a ridge in the hillside on the edge of the platform which would often be held in place by a cobble retaining wall. The construction of tent platforms on the hillside imparted a terraced appearance to the landscape (Fig. 4). It is this terraced effect with the associated roadways, bridge remains and artifacts that speak of the frantic days of the gold rush.

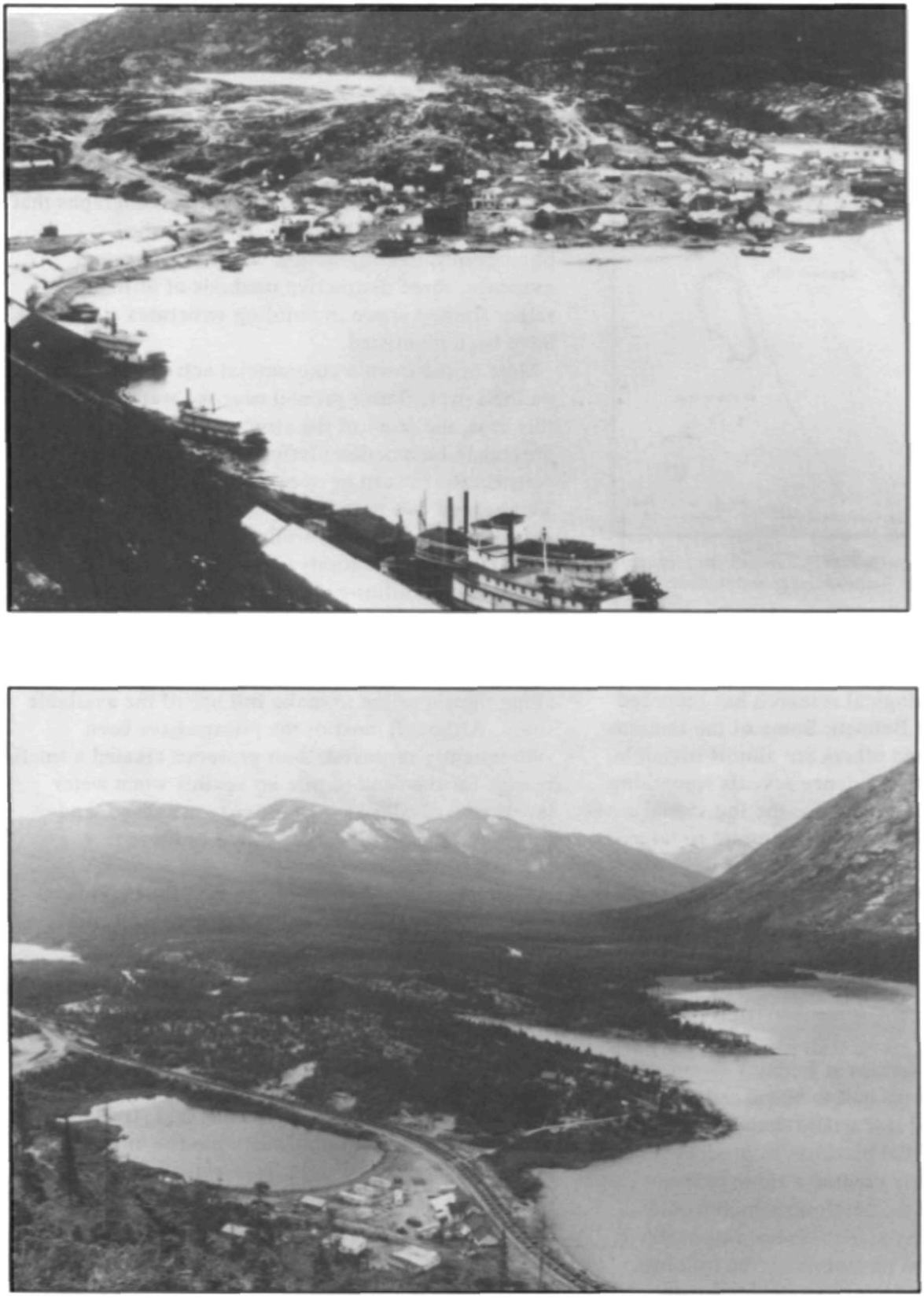
Structural Platforms

Naturally it is difficult to distinguish between a platform or terrace constructed for a large tent and one constructed for a more permanent structure. This is because most of the structural remains have long since been removed from the site. In most instances it is only through the use of historic photographs that this distinction can be made. By using the photographs in conjunction with the on-ground evidence, three distinctive methods of utilizing rather limited space in building structures at Bennett have been identified.

Most of the town's commercial activity occurred on the lower, flatter ground near the water's edge. In this area, the front of the structure was cut into the ground and a wooden platform supported by pilings constructed toward or over the water's edge (Fig. 5). This served two purposes. First, the platform supported the structure well above water level, allowing for fluctuations in water levels without flooding the building. Second, watercraft could dock at the back of a commercial building, simplifying the process of loading and unloading supplies. These construction methods allowed commercial buildings along the shoreline to make full use of the available space. Although most of the pilings have been subsequently removed, their presence created a small barrier for the sand to pile up against when water levels rose. Today, archaeologists use these sand ridges to identify the areal extent of these commercial structures.

A second method was used for structures situated on the main road across from those on the water's edge, at the foot of the slope. Here, in a manner similar to that just described, the back side of the structure rather than the front was excavated directly into the hillside and the excavated soil used to create a level surface for the building. This allowed the façade of the building to face the lakeshore and structures on the other side of the main street.

In areas of steeper slope and upon the hillside, a variety of terraces were built directly into the slope. Depending on the size of the structure and the degree of slope, these buildings consisted of two to five terraces. These terraces were created in much the same fashion as those utilized for tent platforms, but the degree of the alignment of the terraces is an indication of whether these plaforms were established for tents or multi-terraced buildings (Fig. 6).



3 Aerial view (top) of historic Bennett City ca. 1899 and (bottom) in the summer of 1991. Note the lack of vegetation in the historic photo compared with the recent photo.
Top photo courtesy of Provincial Archives of British Columbia/HP-51622; bottom photo by D. Gyles

4 Tent platform recessed into hillside with dirt piled at front as an earthen and cobble retaining wall.
Photo by P. Nieuwhof

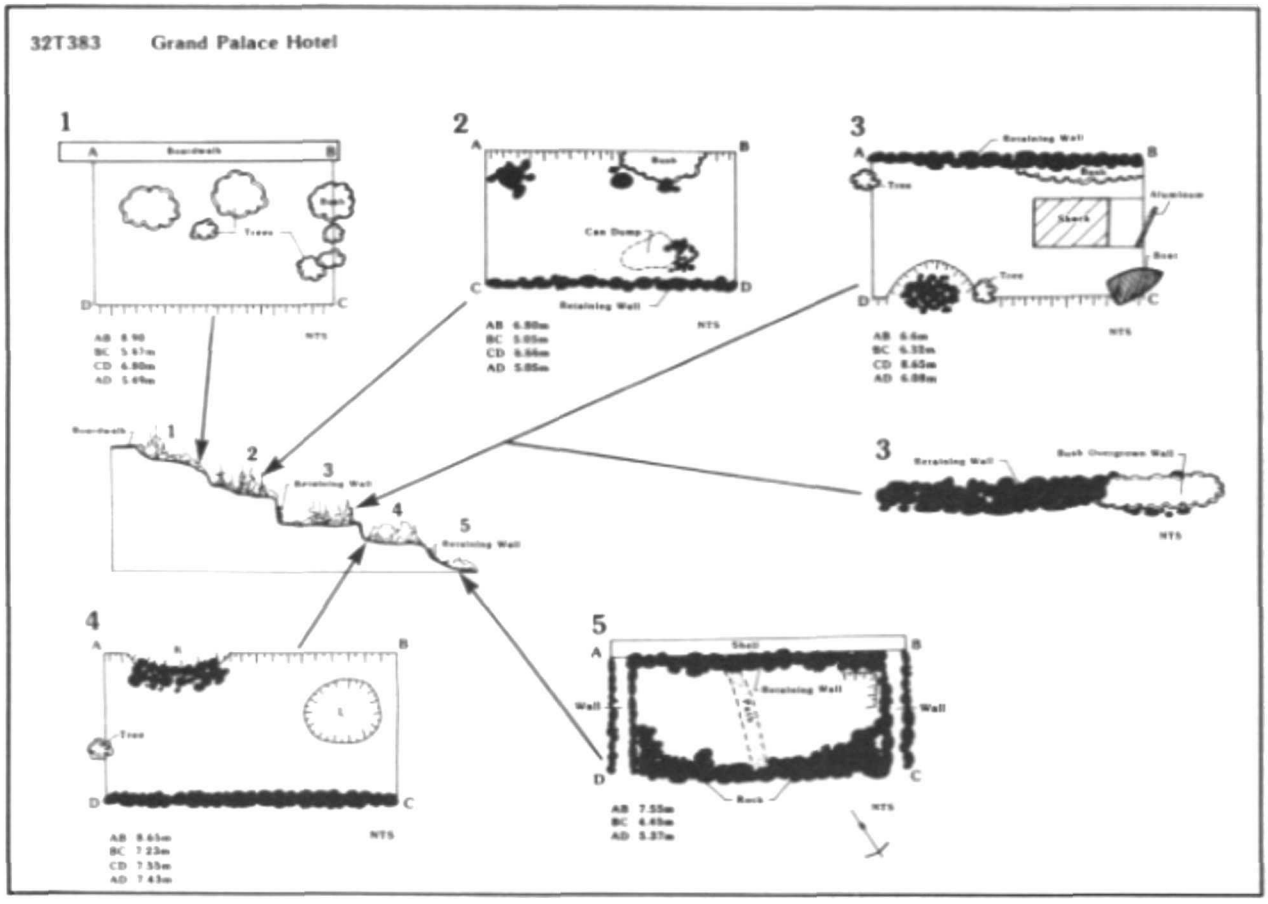
Streets, Wharves and Bridges

Most visitors to Bennett still walk along the original roads which were constructed for the townsite during its occupancy. Some of the historic pathways are cobble-lined, and in certain locations it is possible to see where cobbles have been used to level uneven areas. As the structural and tent platforms cut into the hillside created steep ridges, it is now difficult to walk over them without causing serious erosion of the slope.

Along the shoreline one can see large wooden posts or concentrations of cobbles which have been interpreted as quays, and have served as boat docking locations.

Most distinctive are the remains of a large wharf consisting of numerous posts and rock cribbing associated with a sand access ramp leading directly to it (Fig. 7). This is where the large stern-wheelers docked and loaded supplies destined for the goldfields near Dawson.

5 Historic photo showing hotels and other commercial businesses supported by posts (pilings) over the waters of Lake Bennett.
Photo courtesy of British Columbia Archives and Record Service, HP33926



6 The Grand Palace Hotel (top), an historic multi-terraced building. Profile of terraces (bottom).
Photo courtesy of Suzzalo Library, University of Washington, Yukon-Cities-Bennett Collection; drawing by D. Elrick

7 Pilings from the large wharf with archaeologist standing on rock cribbing.
Photo by P. Nieuwhof

8 Detail of one of the 11 rock cribs of the King's Bridge over One Mile Creek.
Photo by P. Nieuwhof

9 Historic photo of Homan River sawmill with scows being constructed in the foreground and the main mill building in the background.
Photo courtesy of British Columbia Archives and Record Service, HP33921

Also visible is the cribbing which supported the King's Bridge, used to access the western side of One Mile Creek (Lindeman Creek) and the King's Sawmill (Fig. 8). The mill is located on the eastern bank of the Homan River approximately 500 metres (530 yards) above the river mouth. The sawmill supplied lumber for the construction of the Bennett Church and commercial buildings. Scows and other smaller boats were also constructed and sold to the Stampeders (Fig. 9).

Artifact Concentrations

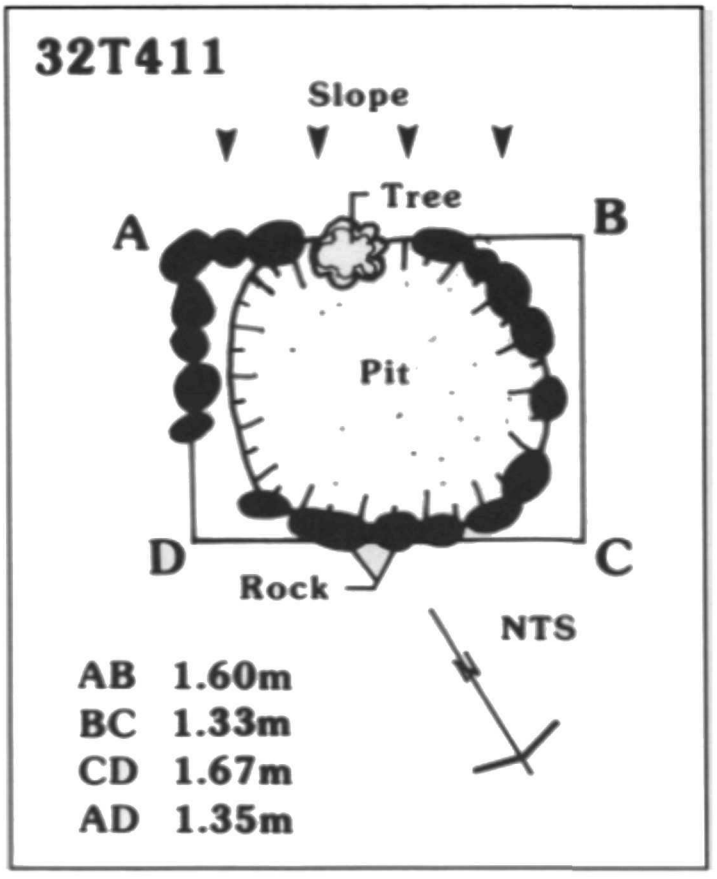
Most artifact concentrations at Bennett are the result of refuse disposal, but the displacement of artifacts which has occurred makes this determination difficult. A concentration of artifacts will often represent only one artifact type, suggesting activities other than refuse disposal. This could be the case in the commercial areas of town, where many artifact concentrations consist of broken bottles. The implication is that businesses saved the bottles for recycling purposes. Historic evidence for a bottling operation in Bennett does exist, and such an operation would require a regular supply of bottles. The bottles may have been stored at these locations, left behind when the site was abandoned and subsequently broken (Fig. 10).

Many of the artifact concentrations at Bennett are a mixture of gold rush period and more recent artifacts, suggesting these artifact concentrations were created during a later period. Such remains may reflect post-gold rush era activities, in which individuals cleaned up particular areas of the site for their own use.

Small Depressions (privy pits or caches)

Visitors to Bennett may observe small depressions in the ground surface. Most of these features, generally consisting of a small, relatively deep and cobble-lined depression, have been identified as privy pits or caches. These types of features were usually identified in what are believed to be residential zones and in many cases are also associated with a quantity of refuse in the general vicinity (Fig. 11).

10 Bottle dump associated with commercial building on lakeshore of Bennett.
Photo by P. Nieuwhof



11 Illustration of privy pit.
Drawn by D. Elrick

12 Turn of the century grave marker and picket fence at the Bennett Cemetery located about one-half mile (.08 km) south of Bennett City between and Lindeman Lakes.
Photo by D. Cooper

Bennett Cemetery

An historic cemetery dating to the gold rush period lies about one-half mile (0.8km) south of Bennett City, above and to the east of the main hiking trail. There are approximately 22 graves contained within the graveyard. Examples of period grave markers and fences are evident (Fig. 12).

Protection by the Individual

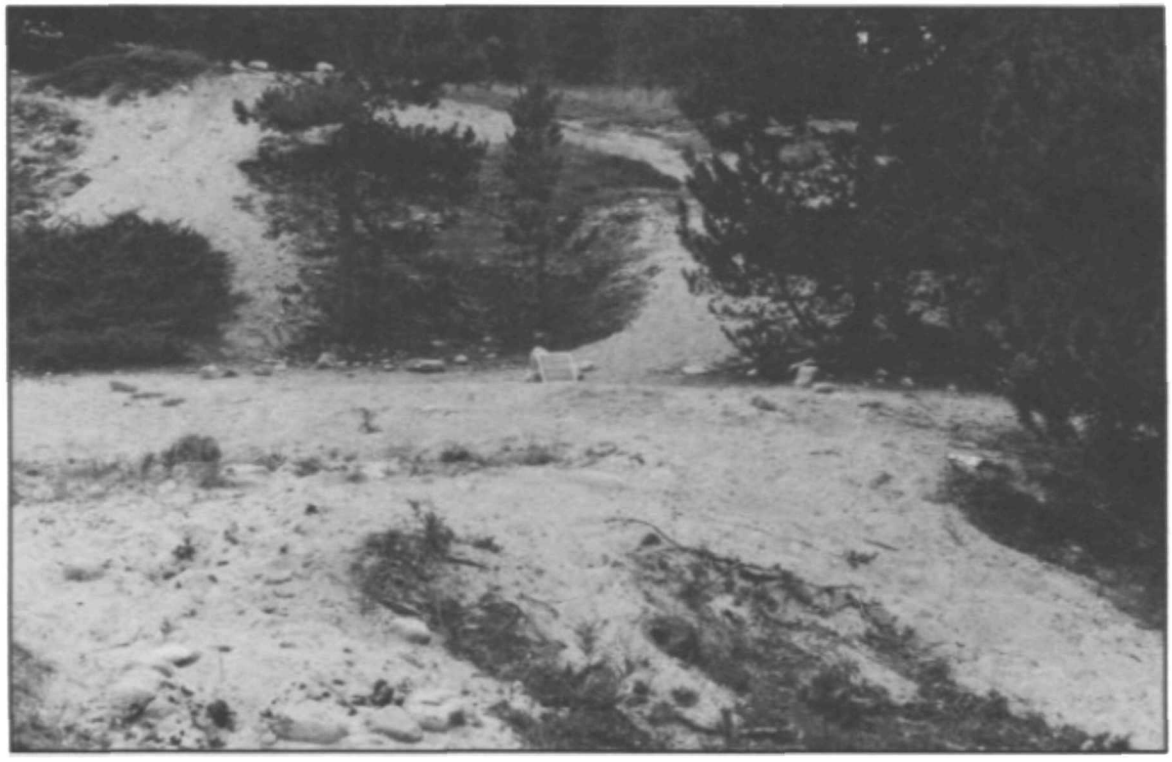
Spread along the Chilkoot Trail are numerous remains associated with the last great gold rush of 1897-98. Viewing these remains in their natural setting can be a memorable experience and one that each generation of individuals should enjoy. In order to provide this opportunity it is important to preserve Bennett as a landscape feature.

One way in which to do this is by maintaining the stabilizing vegetation which helps hold the loose sandy soil in place. Throughout the site, paths have been created on steep slopes and banks by people trying to reach existing trails, terraces or the lake shore. Once these paths are created they gradually start to widen as vegetation is removed and erosive processes are initiated (Fig. 13). Often visitors climb up steep slopes to reach existing terraces for the purposes of establishing campsites. When establishing a campsite, it is important to ensure that it can be reached from a major trail and that the campsite is situated in a relatively broad flat area somewhat off the main trail (Fig. 14). Indiscriminate camping is often responsible for much of the damage that occurs to the trail (Fig. 15). Furthermore, if a campsite is established and windy conditions arise, it is often expedient to use large cobbles as a method of securing tent pegs. The problem is that the cobbles used to secure tent pegs or create campfire rings were usually part of a retaining wall dating to the gold rush period. In most instances, the cobbles used for these purposes are not intentionally removed directly from the wall, but have been previously loosened by individuals who have unwittingly trampled over the feature. These loosened cobbles eventually become dislodged, further weakening the entire structure (Fig. 16). As the weakened retaining wall collapses, the terrace begins to slide down the slope, essentially destroying the landscape feature.

Another major problem observed at Bennett is the movement of artifacts from one location to another. Artifacts are important in terms of their location on the ground; consequently, most of the information the provide centres upon where they are found and what is found near them. In order for archaeologists to correctly interpret human activities associated with the gold rush, they cannot be viewing the activities of post-gold rush visitors collecting or moving artifacts from one place to another. Any movement of the artifacts destroys the opportunity for research and the ability to increase our understanding of past human behaviour, and the interaction which made up the social phenomena of the gold rush.

The remains along the Chilkoot Trail are very fragile and need to be protected while they are enjoyed. If destroyed, both the information and enjoyment will be lost forever. Most visitors do not intentionally damage archaeological remains, but a large volume of foot traffic or uncontrolled wandering can create severe damage in concert with other natural processes.

It is the responsibility of every individual to protect these remains so future generations can enjoy the legacy of the gold rush.



13 Eroding parths on the hillside at Bennett showing the destructive of uncontrolled foot traffic throughout the historic site.
Photo by K. Lunn

14 Park visitors camping on flat open terraces overlooking the lake. These terraces are across from the main path, an historic road, between the lake and the hillside.
Photo by K. Lunn

15 Visitor campsite on the main path which forces other people to walk on the fragile vegetation to either side. This causes a loss of vegetation, widening of the path and an increase in the rate of erosion of the slope (right).
Photo by K. Lunn

16 Loosened cobbles from a retaining wall due to visitors inadvertently walking over the historic wall. This action will eventually lead to the collapse of the wall and a loss of integrity of the landscape.
Photo by M. McCracken

R61-9/305E
ISSN: 1184-7182
Published by authority of the Department of Canadian Heritage

Canada