

Gold Rush Girls:

Newcomer and Native Women's Relationships during Yukon's Gold Rush

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The specific contact periods between First Nations and Europeans during the fur trade, gold rush, and highway construction eras occurred in the Yukon at similar times as they did in the rest of Canada's west. However, white interest in the far north increased especially between 1870 and 1940. Written records of Yukon settlement date back to the early 1600s with the first explorers and traders entering the far north, extending well into the mid-1900s with road construction connecting the territory with southern Canada. Early explorers, trade businesses, missionaries, miners, researchers, and ethnographers have been interested in how the Yukon has been populated, and much attention has focused on relationships between newcomers and First Nations groups of the northern area.¹ Adventure and abundant resources in the supposed untouched and uninhabited rough northern territories captivated many traders, missionaries, and business people who hoped to profit from the riches of the area. Much of the settlement records related to what is now the Yukon Territory highlight the experiences and ideologies of predominantly European men who were new to the area, and were interested in capitalizing on the riches and opportunities of the north.

However, this vast north has been habited by local First Nations groups who claim ancestry in the area dating back to time immortal, evident in traditional creation stories and oral histories passed down through the generations of local First Nations families and groups.² Therefore, there are different types of records related to the settlement of the Yukon, based on the perspectives and interpretations of various groups and their cultural methods of documenting information. One type of information regarding newcomer/First Nations contact are those memories of local First Nations elders, some of which have been documented by ethnographers and anthropologists visiting the north, but many of which exist only in the traditional stories, myths, and oral histories; these oral records have been passed down through generations from the beginning of time.³ A second set of written records are those more accessible and more often found in Canadian historical records of settlement and recorded by newcomers in the north; this information, which is often made available

to students, tells the story of populating the north from ethnocentric and androcentric perspectives of this period, reflective of the colonization of the area.⁴ There are different documentations of the settlement of the Yukon area written and interpreted from cultural and gender perspectives, including the written records of male newcomers and researchers, and the oral histories and traditions of local First Nations groups.

Further to the difficulties in different styles and methods of documentations of contact between newcomer and First Nations groups are the limited records of women's experiences during this period.⁵ The limitations of accessing women's perspectives of this contact period in the north may be due to women's social status at this time and compounded for First Nations women who not only experienced gender bias but cultural and racial bias as well. Documents of newcomer women are found in written records of diaries and journals, however Native women's experiences are less likely to be written and more likely found in the stories and personal histories less accessible to outsiders and unavailable the standard historical accounts of Canadian settlement.⁶ However, women had significant roles, both local Native women and newcomer women, during the settlement period of 1870 to 1940 in the Yukon Territory. Emphasis on one particular contact period, in the case of this research paper the gold rush period of 1898 in the Yukon, shows that experiences of women were documented differently based on gender, as well as on race and culture.

Isolation and extremely harsh conditions required a certain tolerance for those settling in the Yukon, and women played key roles in supporting the growing populations through the fur trade and into the gold rush period in the territory. First, an understanding of the history of newcomer/First Nations contact in the Yukon provides a context for the relationships between women resulting of the influx of gold rush settlers. Second, considering the relevance of oral histories as well as written records is necessary in order to show that First Nations women were just as prevalent during the settlement of the north as found in newcomer women's written records. Third, analyzing the different

documentations of newcomer and Native women thematically, noting aspects of style and form, proves that although records are limited Yukon women played key roles in the area's settlement. The roles of Aboriginal and newcomer women were differently documented, and women's methods of contributing to social growth within the territory may have varied. Thus, different social emphasis and value was placed on women's contributions based on race or cultural background and expectations of women at this time, as historical records analysis will show.

History of Contact in the Yukon

In 1973 the Yukon Native Brotherhood presented their paper, "Together Today for our Children Tomorrow: A Statement of Grievances and an Approach to Settlement by the Yukon Indian People," to the Government of Canada. This document set ground breaking precedents for the rights of Yukon Native people as it eventually became the template for Yukon First Nations' Umbrella Final Agreements, which recognize the Aboriginal rights of local Native groups to the land and resources of their areas, and establishes the nature of relationship between First Nation and federal governments. This remarkable paper represents the perspectives and experiences of Yukon First Nations people, and is respectably cited in this research paper as it provides a brief description of the historical contact experiences of First Nations people of the Yukon. "Together Today" is foundational and fundamental in understanding how history has been differently documented of European and First Nations' historical experiences, and reiterates the importance of understanding history from contrasting cultural perspectives.

The Yukon Native Brotherhood describes First Nation contact during various settlement periods: the first whitemen, Russian traders 300 years ago; the second whitemen, the fur traders of the mid to late 1800's; the third whitemen, the 60,000 gold seekers who infiltrated the territory between 1896 and 1900; and the fourth whitemen, the American soldiers who built the highway connecting the Yukon with the south and north. The Brotherhood also notes the social effects of the

building mining and gas industry experienced by the local Native groups including strained relationships within their communities and with outsiders working on their lands.⁷ Of particular interest for this research paper are the fur trade periods and gold rush era, and there have been numerous and significant research and documentation of the fur trade era in the Yukon which creates context for the subsequent mining and gold rush periods. The Yukon Native Brotherhood's paper suggests that "the Klondike Gold Discovery changed the Indian way of life... There were about three thousand Indians here at that time if you go by the Government records. The Indian people feel there were many more than three thousand."⁸ This statement is profound as it clearly shows the lack of acknowledgement status of local native groups in the Yukon leading to the gold rush period. Read in combination with the vast documentations of white gold seekers of their Klondike experiences, and even more contrasting to the records of white women and lack of native women's historical experiences, this shows the invisibility of the first peoples originally of the Yukon.

Describing the history of pre-Gold Rush contact between white and Native groups in the Yukon provides a context for understanding relationships and roles of women in the Klondike, as well as how and why historical records contain and lack certain information. Coates states that upon discovery of gold in the Yukon River Basin people rushed to the north assuming that it was uninhabited except for a few hundred Indians in an isolated region, ignoring the history of the fur trade and First Nations' contribution to this economy.⁹ This information suggests that newcomers perceived the Yukon and resources of the area to be open and free for the taking, expecting little resistance or relationship to be developed with any local peoples. In contrast, Coates states that "throughout the pre-Gold Rush era, the Indians displayed a sensitivity toward the complexities of competitive trade and a willingness to exploit competition," exerting their power by controlling much of the trade into the Yukon interior, which would become the area of the Klondike Gold Rush.¹⁰ The paternalistic perspectives of gold seekers heading north and lack of knowledge or

consideration of relationships to be developed with local groups is characteristic of social values of this era, including the invisibility of women, both white and native, in the prospecting process.

Trade relationships have been well documented, developed over hundreds of years between Europeans and northern First Nations groups, as well as elaborate and established trading partnerships between Coastal and inland First Nations groups of the Yukon.¹¹ Through this period contact involved the meeting of Native spokespeople and chiefs, as well as the marriages of European and white men to First Nations women to secure trade partnerships as were often the customs between First Nations traders. First Nations women played a key role in the establishment of relationships between white and Native groups, as well as the success of white male traders in their harsh and hostile environment through their extensive knowledge of northern survival in their homelands. First Nations women provided company for traders, 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.¹² These methods of First Nation and newcomer development of trade relationships can by extension apply to cultural relationships at least with the initiation of the gold rush era, informing the contributions of First Nations men and women to the settlement of the area. It is noteworthy that the initial major gold discoveries in the Yukon which triggered the Klondike Gold Rush were claimed by three non-Native men married to local Native women, the first women of the rush.¹³

Native control of Indian-White contact of the fur trade era and Native economic participation were key aspects of the adaptation or erosion in Indian society and culture. Prior to the Klondike gold rush, Natives living along the Yukon River participated in mining activities in addition to the still thriving fur trade business, through which First Nations men and women maintained cultural anonymity; relationships between groups was complementary.¹⁴ Local Native groups still outnumbered newcomers four to one, provided traditional foods and casual labour for miners, and

had little need or interest in the material comforts that monetary gain allowed. Yet, after the Gold Rush whites outnumbered Natives eight to one, and the traditional lands and resources necessary for local Native survival had been severely disrupted by the tens of thousands of miners.¹⁵ Consequently, the massive influx of miners during the Gold Rush period “relegated [natives] to an increasingly peripheral economic position, a position which was attended with a loss of native ability to influence the actions of the whites.”¹⁶ Porslid also notes that “unlike the fur-trade period, however, the mining period was characterized by direct competition with the Native people” including economic and environmental disruptions as well as more permanent settlement of miners on Native lands.¹⁷ This information is noteworthy for Native women in consideration of the establishment of more permanent communities meant increased pressure to conform to dominant and Eurocentric gender values and expectations of women to occupy the private sphere as social and cultural agents whose role was primarily to support men’s pursuits.¹⁸ Marked disparity evolved not just between whites and Natives but furthermore between white women and Native women who had even fewer opportunities during and after the Gold Rush, in terms of the development of new social standards.

The relevance of referring to the history of the fur trade, mining, and then gold rush periods in the Yukon together show a rapid shift in local First Nations’ opportunities for contributing to a changing economic and social environment. Participation in the mining economy dwindled for Native men and women with the growing number of newcomers who applied their values to create social and cultural environments resembling those of their native homelands. Subsequent records of women’s experiences reflect these growing European values in the north evident in the historical accounts of newcomer gold rush women. As cited by Porslid, the iconic Pierre Berton’s mother, Laura Berton, noted the creation of hierarchal social classes in Dawson City, four classes of which Natives and Native women particularly were of the very bottom rung of the social ladder.¹⁹ The lack of Native women’s records of gold rush experiences and relationships with newcomers can be

attributed to the gender and cultural biases of this growing newcomer society in the north. Further, government legislation at the time did not allow Native women to stake claims and so little documentation of their contributions to mining activities with their non-Native partners would have been recorded.²⁰ Additionally, few First Nations men and women were literate at this time and information was not recorded in written form; it was instead passed down through generations and shared through the oral histories, myths and stories of specific groups. Interestingly, Native women are often the carriers of this important historical information, and with the growth of ethnographic documents of First Nations women's history in the north, another aspect of the Gold Rush experience is evident.

Oral Histories and Written Records

In order to understand relationships between Native and newcomer women in the Yukon during the Gold Rush, it is important to acknowledge the nature of research and recorded materials from this period. By 1898 there had been many decades of contact between traders and local Native groups, mostly documented by trading companies and some anthropologists and ethnographers; little documentation exists in written form from Native people themselves, due to their oral traditions and basically a lack of outside interest in Native culture aside from trade related details.²¹ Prominent ethnographer Julie Cruikshank spent many decades working with local Native people in the Yukon and studying the area's history with particular interest in First Nations' oral traditions. Cruikshank has shown that the Yukon's historical records that can be accessed are of two forms, oral and written, and also of two cultures, European and First Nation, therefore with different goals and objectives based on different perspectives of events.²² The author suggests that the nature of these records also differs, noting that newcomers wrote about their personal impressions of the people and area, however Native oral histories reflect an understanding of events from their home land.²³ Very few Native peoples of the Yukon were literate at the time of the gold rush, and cultural traditions based

on the portability and adaptability necessary of their nomadic lifestyle meant that material baggage was minimal, and wealth was “carried in the head instead of on the back,” passed on through oral tradition.²⁴ This differentiation yet validity of both written and oral histories is significant in order to compare the types of records of non-Native women with those of Native women, also recognizing the difficulties in accessing oral histories from outside the cultural group.

Fortunately, Cruikshank has documented the oral histories of prominent members of the Yukon’s First Nations communities in order to provide an alternate perspective of the experiences of local first peoples in order to analyze the effects of newcomers to the north. The author suggests that by combining the written and oral accounts of the gold rush in particular “shows how ideas about family and community organization – which differ from one culture to another – may influence the *interpretation* of events.”²⁵ Specifically, Cruikshank refers to application of the cultural lens to show differences in interpretations of the ‘facts’ based on the written records of miners versus the oral histories of Native groups of the discovery of gold by local Native men in the Yukon which triggered the gold rush.²⁶ Interestingly, the oral histories of Yukon Native cultures is often the wealth of women, and further, the stories of the gold rush refer more often to the women who supported their miner husbands, as Kitty Smith’s story illustrates:

They live one winter, Kate Carmack and him, her husband. He’s got wife. He’s all right! She does everything, that Indian woman, you know – hunts, just like nothing, sets snares for rabbits. That’s what they eat. I know her: that’s my Auntie, Kate Carmack, my old man’s mother’s sister. One lady, Dawson people, gave them fish. She cut it up, Kate Carmack – that’s how they lived all winter...²⁷

Miss Smith’s story not only shows the value of Native women’s contributions to the gold rush in the Yukon, it also represents a social and cultural appreciation of women’s activities and their roles. The story itself is a record of a ‘fact’ of this period of history, and is also used in the present to teach Native women of cultural values, gender roles and nature of relationships of their ancestors.

Oral histories of the Yukon native women may not have been recorded during the gold rush, as diaries and journals of newcomer women were, but many years later their experiences and interpretations of their pasts are still living today. Cruikshank suggests that “the stories they tell show remarkable persistence and address important questions in women’s lives during a period of industrial expansion and social upheaval.”²⁸ Stories were and are used as a cultural tool to transfer knowledge and historical information across generations, and until ethnographers began to document these stories it could appear to outsiders that there were few contributions to the gold rush from local Native peoples. According to western writing standards a linear model of describing particular events and activities is understood as valid documentation; traditional native stories however are organized differently, with implicit meanings not necessarily recognizable to outsiders, a continual communicative act used to translate life experiences and are a part of personal history.²⁹ One such story is that of Skookum Jim, the Native gold rush legend, which explains how supernatural forces and myth affected his finding of gold but also of his contributions to his family and community, and the unfortunate fate that came of his material wealth.³⁰ The story has many metaphors, symbols and meanings unique to the storyteller but is interpreted by the listener in terms of their cultural terms. The women telling this story are making a point about blending social and cultural constraints, about the expected behaviour and relationships of men and women, and the importance of maintaining practical knowledge as well as traditional beliefs through social change.

Gold Rush Women

As suggested previously, women’s records of their Klondike gold rush experiences have been differently documented but equally relevant historical accounts from two cultures; First Nations’ women’s oral histories are comparable to and as relevant as the diaries and journals of newcomer women. Author and historian Claire Rudolph Murphy compiled a book describing the notable women of the Klondike gold rush who were attracted to the north, suggesting that one in ten

stampedeers heading north were women, sometimes with their husbands, with other men, or even alone and ready to start new lives in what was thought to be new and unchartered territory.³¹ Murphy includes the contributions of prominent First Nations women in her gold rush compilation, noting that “of all the women who participated in the northern gold rushes, none have been more persistently overlooked than the Native women.”³² The remainder of this paper will describe and then compare newcomer’s and Native women’s experiences and participations in the gold rush, suggesting that the themes of relationship, adventure, and cultural construction shaped personal the personal histories of both cultures of women of the gold rush. Although documented differently, both cultures have historical records of women’s contribution to the gold rush in the Yukon, however those of non-Native women are far more accessible and referenced than those of the local First Nations women who supported many of the men and women coming to the north.

Non-Native Women’s Gold Rush Experiences

The Klondike gold rush of 1898 came at a time of poverty and depression in the rest of the country, and the lure of gold in the north attracted many women who were willing to work hard to establish new opportunities. Women’s character was described in the Skaguay News in 1897:

It takes strong, healthy, courageous women to stand the terrible hardships that must necessarily be endured... Women pioneers hold an honored place in the history and development of the west and great northwest; and when the history of the development of Alaska, and the great interior region, known as the Yukon country, shall have been write, it will be found that women have played no inconsequential part therein. There are two sides to the life of the woman pioneer. One represents hardships and privations – hope deferred, which maketh the heart sick, trials and disappointments. The other presents fuel for the spirit of adventure, and its attendant excitement, leading one on and on in the hope – in this case – of golden reward, and the fondest fruition of one’s most cherished dreams.³³

Adventure was accompanied by hard work, and women capitalized on the large numbers of men travelling north making use of their domestic and practical skills of cooking, sewing, laundering and housekeeping to also profit, and often worked gold claims and mines alongside men. Through the settlement of miners in the north, a new social order was established as the newcomer women

brought their culture and values with them to re-construct their lives in the new land. In 1899, the construction of the White Pass Railway to the north made the area even more accessible to newcomers, and brought an increased number of middle class women who changed the character of the northern mining towns as they encouraged cultural growth and development. Focusing on three white women's gold rush experiences themes of relationship, adventure and independence, and cultural construction are expressed through their personal writings.

Martha Black is perhaps one of the most memorable women of the Klondike gold rush, leaving her well to do lifestyle, husband and children in the US for the lure of adventure, independence and new opportunity. Very quickly Martha realized the social and cultural differences between her former and future life, especially when she was confronted with the hardship of hiking the Chilkoot trail and the lack of supplies and resources she had previously been accustomed to. Martha had endured the rugged north and hiked the trail while pregnant, gave birth to a son, and staked claims and built her own mining camp which she ran with her older son as a single business woman at a time when women were not often in these social positions. In her autobiography, Martha wrote, "what I wanted was not shelter and safety, but liberty and opportunity."³⁴ Martha married a successful attorney, George Black, and became a political icon in the north, working to establish political presence and women's rights, and at the age of 70 was the second woman elected to Canadian Parliament.

Key factors in Martha's decision to move north, as described in her memoirs, incorporated adventure and independence, opportunity and cultural construction. Martha Black referred to her trip to the Klondike as "more than just my headstrong determination to carry out an idea. It was the pivotal point of my life – my destiny" and her "fighting spirit...the pioneer spirit, not to be overwhelmed by trouble, but to arise and go forth to meet it."³⁵ Early in her memoirs Black regards the developing Dawson City as disordered, lacking social and cultural class but with pioneer

character, and describes women of the Klondike stampede: “there were three classes: members of the oldest profession in the world, who ever follow armies and gold rushes; dance hall and variety girls, whose business was to entertain and be dancing partners; and a few others, wives with unbounded faith in and love for their mates, or the odd person like myself on a special mission.”³⁶ As Martha Black continued to thrive in Dawson as a business woman, her new life allowed her increased social status and opportunity to build the cultural and social character of the town. The latter portion of her autobiography describes in much detail the political pursuits and changing culture of the north through her lifetime, showing the value that she placed on the establishment of order in the once reckless rush to the Klondike. It is noteworthy that there are very few references to interactions or relationships with the local Native peoples, and no reference in her autobiography of her own relationships with Native women at all throughout her northern travels and life.

A second well documented woman’s experiences during the gold rush are the memoirs of immigrant seamstress Anna DeGraff, who traveled north as a single mother in search of her lost stamper son who created a new life in the north. Anna’s personal history speaks less of business and profits, and more of social distinctions and survival in the north; she clearly describes the independence necessary of women to survive in the harsh north, as well as the changing social values with the development of the Klondike. Early in her journals Anna cites a song which they sang repeatedly, exemplifying the character of those rushing north: “Slop cakes in the morning, and whiskey when I’m dry - we are sailing down the Yukon and never, never die!”³⁷ She tells of the hard working newcomer and Native women in the camps, cooking and caring for the mining men, and of the differences in culture and customs between the local and outsider women who worked together to support each other in their survival. Anna describes relationships between cultures in the Yukon in more detail than did Martha Black, noting that she got to know the Native women very well, and

many of her stories told of how she saw Native women mistreated by their white husbands as more and more white women arrived in the north.

Anna DeGraff's stories suggest that the relationships between cultures changed drastically during the gold rush, when once white and Natives worked together but later would be divided by social distinctions persuaded by the building social pressures to re-create European standards of their previous southern lives. She suggests that there were no social distinctions at one point early in her time in the north, citing 800 men wintering in their small town and eight white women, and thirty Native women who had married white men; only one white woman made it clear that she did not approve of Native women attending a dance but she was outnumbered by the others who welcomed company and support.³⁸ Anna described Native women with respect for their industriousness and efforts to live between two cultures, often referring to memorable moments shared with Native women and the skills they employed to support their families and neighbours. The descriptions of white women like Anna DeGraff show that there were building barriers between classes and cultures in the north as populations grew with the increase in white women. As well, her accounts are important to acknowledge the reciprocal relationships established initially between newcomers and local Native groups, proving a presence of Native women of the gold rush.

The diaries and journals of Peggy Rouch differ from those of the women described above because she traveled to the north as a young girl, accompanied by an aunt and uncle who were already established miners in the territory, looking for opportunity of adventure not wealth. Peggy was one of the first white women in the north, just as Martha and Anna were, however her experiences describe relationships established with local Native girls and pressures to marry white miners and bring culture to the north, as was expected in other Canadian frontier settlements. Similar to Anna DeGraff's descriptions of Native/white relations, Peggy Rouch shows an understanding of culture and appreciation for supporting one another despite differences in race throughout her

journals. Peggy recalls a conversation with her mother regarding Native women in their area:

“...Remember, we are all of the same physical makeup under the outer layer of flesh. The main differences among peoples and races are those of education, environment, and of course, climate...The very fact that their not-too-distant ancestors lived close to nature gives them a broader and deeper insight into the meaning of life.”³⁹ The fact that this entry was deemed memorable enough to be added to Peggy’s memoirs shows that her perspective on women and culture was shaped by her experiences in the north living alongside Native women, and also shows that there were many white women in the Klondike that appreciated Native wisdom and culture as much as their own desire to establish their social systems in the new land.

Native Women’s Gold Rush Experiences

First Nations women’s stories tell of attempts to preserve native culture and tradition, family and relationships to the land and resources; they are found in the oral histories that are still passed down through generations today. Many of the white women’s journals end with success stories of survival and bringing social order to the north, but those of Native women more often tell of focus on struggles to incorporate two cultures and the lack of recognition of their involvement. Murphy notes that Kate Carmack has received little to no credit for her role in the discovery of gold in her home land until more recently as oral histories of the gold rush from Native people’s perspective have not been written.⁴⁰ As mentioned earlier, First Nations Elders tell of Kate’s hard work to support her white husband and the role that myth and legend played in their discovery of gold, as told by Kate’s relation many years later; the significance of this story repeated by various women shows the relevance of oral histories and Kate’s legacy:

They live one winter, Kate Carmack and him, her husband. He’s got wife. He’s all right. She do everything that Indian woman, you know – hunt, just like nothing. Cut snare for rabbit. They eat that. I know her, my auntie, Kate Carmack, my old man sister (aunt).⁴¹

This woman's story continues to describe the finding of gold by Kate and her brother, Skookum Jim, on Kate's family's land while hunting, and includes references to the help of other family and traditional spirit helpers such as Wealth Woman. Unfortunately, Kate's contribution was denied by her husband who left her, destitute, for a white woman, and she returned to her Yukon people.

Kate Carmack was one of three influential Native women who married white prospectors who would be the first to find gold in the Klondike to spark the rush of outsiders to their territory. The other two women's stories are less known than even Kate's; Kate's familiarity to those today is likely due to Kate's affinity with her prestigious Tlingit First Nations group, or possibly due to the tragic ending of Kate's story which has survived the generations through oral histories as a cultural teaching tool about the nature of wealth and materialism which is not suited to Native cultural values. Kate McQueston, another prominent half Native, half Russian wife of a white prospector also struck it rich early in the rush, but seems to have had more success at integrating white and Native cultures possibly due to her involvement with the fur trade business prior to finding gold. Her business sense and experiences working as a mediator between white and Native traders and living between the two cultures possibly prepared her for the drastic cultural changes to come, establishing a mixed community where she would raise her family.⁴² Due to her social status, written records were more likely to exist to document Kate McQueston's role in the gold rush due to her trade business involvement, and lending credit to her experiences beyond those of the oral histories of the Native peoples.

Similar to Kate McQueston's findings of gold, Jennie Bosco Harper of the Koyukon First Nation people married a white prospector and they joined her sister who had also married a white prospector, together discovering gold. However, Jennie remained close to her Native land and people, unlike Kate Carmack who travelled south with her husband to spend their wealth, but similarly to Kate McQueston who stayed close to her people and trade business. Possibly the

commitment to cultural traditions and lifestyles is what protected some Native women from gold rush demise, as experienced by other Native women and groups.⁴³ Jennie's connection with her people was maintained throughout her life, and she would live to be regarded as a well respected Elder in her community, speaking her Native language and a renowned oral historian. Those Native groups living closer to the gold rush sites were more affected than those isolated communities able to continue with their traditional lifestyles and show little cultural change due to the influx of stampedeers.⁴⁴ It would follow then that the Native women living in closer proximity to white mining men would be targeted as supports to the mining communities in various ways, hired for domestic labour, marriage prospects, and the building prostitution trade in the gold rush towns.

Cruikshank notes that the Han people of the Dawson area, the heart of the gold rush, were ``virtually decimated`` as a result of the gold rush, who relocated to their traditional camp to avoid the onslaught of outsiders and the negative aspects of the abundance of wealth that was unknown to the Native peoples. One woman's oral history tells of her father's role as chief of their people and his struggles to protect them from the devastation he foresaw:

He never see any white people in his life before then. But, he knew that they were human beings, and he was friendly with them and welcome them. And he told his people to be good to them too. So they are, and they were good friends. But my dad didn't want my people to get mixed up with them. Because he thought it would ruin their lives and spoil them... My people knew all the Klondike, but they never know nothing about gold.⁴⁵

The struggles that the Han chief could foresee with the coming gold rush and influx of outsiders would affect the Native women differently than the men. Although there would be increased economic opportunity, women in white society were viewed as second to men, however in Native society were equal to men socially and politically.

The changing economy in the north meant changes for the local Native people from traditional land based living to include money, wealth, material culture and work opportunities. One Native woman described working the mine just as her husband's uncle, Skookum Jim, had many

years prior; however this work would coincide with the deaths of her sons and daughter, although their prospecting may have brought them independence and material gain.⁴⁶ There are many stories of First Nations women telling of the changes that came with the gold rush, the difficult transition from traditional to wage work, and the struggles to maintain cultural practices within the changing and developing non-Native society. Cruikshank notes that ``women experienced personal difficulties adjusting to the new way of living, but all of them managed to make those adjustments. Such moves were appropriate to the times, but they significantly changed the directions these women`s lives took.``⁴⁷ This statement is an important indicator of the abilities of First Nations women involved in the gold rush; and it also tells of the development of new culture and traditions to suit the changing environment. The oral histories of women today are representative of Native women`s abilities to compromise and adjust to the changes, albeit with well documented difficulties, evident in the purpose and process of oral tradition, as well as the content found within their stories.

First Nation women`s experiences and the oral histories documented tell less of adventure than stories of white people, although the Native women marrying white prospectors would have had personalities tending towards adventure and risk taking, marrying outside their culture and into a life of trial and tribulation searching for gold. Native women did experience much independence within their culture and societies, unlike the newcomer women who would have experienced many more social and cultural constraints within the private sphere and Victorian values of the time. This sense of autonomy and independence was practised within familial communities, where relationship was key to the independence afforded women, living and working alongside their sisters and aunts.⁴⁸ Therefore, although independence was a key personality trait of many newcomer women found in their diaries and gold rush stories, it was differently experienced by Native women; similarly, reference to culture and tradition from newcomer women spoke of their desire to develop social and cultural values based on their previous southern lifestyles, but with the northern flair and women`s

roles that they enjoyed in the north. One key aspect of the gold rush women which there exists a wide divide is the search for gold in terms of wealth, monetary gain and the accumulation of material goods which characterized the hopes and dreams of newcomer women looking for new opportunities. This focus on wealth and material comforts was not a theme of First Nation women's oral histories, in fact, wealth was often referred to as detrimental to the success of individuals and the survival of tradition and culture.⁴⁹

Conclusion

There seems to be little contention that women's roles during the Klondike gold rush have been secondary to those of the male prospectors with whom they worked, side by side as miners or by supporting with food, shelter and companionship.⁵⁰ Even less well documented are the insights into the actual experiences and feelings of women who participated in the stampede north, as noted by Kelcey who suggests that women's accounts of the gold rush merely ``restore women to their place in the Klondike story`` but lack social analysis necessary to change the stereotypical perceptions of the gold rush and those women involved.⁵¹ Further, Cruikshank adds that oral histories are First Nations' intellectual heritage, providing ``a framework for interpreting the physical and social work in which they have lived and events in their own lives; within this framework, they have devised their own strategies.''⁵² A more thorough understanding of women's Klondike experiences must include each woman's individual experiences as told from her own framework, as Native women's oral histories are comprised.⁵³ There are many aspects of gold rush history which displace women, especially local Native women, from the Klondike experience and their contributions to the growth and development of the social and cultural nature of the north. Even fewer records refer to the relationships that did exist between newcomer and Native women, and the similarities and differences which brought these women together for a period of time, but eventually dividing them.

What is written of the relationships between Native and non-Native women describes survival, strength and social classes that bring peoples together and creates the divisions that we still see today. Even during the fur trade era, the initial settlement of newcomers in the north suggests that relationships were business based and although mixed marriages were documented as facilitating northern trade relations, cultures remained distinct and separate from each other, allowing each group to live apart and yet amicably. However with the influx of prospectors in during the gold rush, social stigmas against Natives prevailed and intercultural relations were discouraged, as more white settlers wished to create the same kinds of stratified societies from which they originated.⁵⁴ As more white women came north miners were less likely to take Native wives, and social pressure to recreate the class systems from outside contributed to fewer mixed marriages, and hence, division between women and cultures. Some Native groups such as the Han near Dawson, the focal point of the finding of gold, discouraged intercultural relations, coinciding with the decreasing need for mutually beneficial relationships between Natives and non-Natives, considering political positions of the time and increased settlement in the north.⁵⁵ At this time, the government was also concerned with protecting the resources and potential wealth of the new northern frontier, which contributed to the relegation of Native peoples from participating in political and economic ventures that might take away opportunity from the white settlers the government hoped would occupy and acculturate the north.

Some historical analysis has focused on the relationships between cultures and specifically women, alluding to the independent and adventurous nature of women involved in the gold rush, but also of the development of class systems. Duncan describes the women who participated in the gold rush as ``intrepid adventurers`` but suggests that the story actually begins with ``the strong and knowledgeable women who were already there, who had lived on this land for thousands of years, and who saw no wilderness – only home as far as the eye could see, a home that would be suddenly

invaded by hordes of gold seekers. These are the women of the First Nations.⁵⁶ The author alludes to the distinction between cultures, and the inevitable mixing of two social classes, and goes on to describe the contributions of Native women of the mixed marriages of the early gold rush days. Further, it is noted that social class systems had been in place since the beginning, but grew more distinct as the gold rush evolved, with First Nations people excluded from these descriptions altogether.⁵⁷ Acknowledging the existence of social hierarchy at the time of the gold rush is an important aspect of understanding how and why women's records of their gold rush experiences are differently documented, specifically between newcomer and Native women.

It is only with equal consideration of oral histories of Yukon Native women together with the diaries and journals of newcomer women's experiences of the Klondike gold rush that we can begin to analyse women's escapades north. Although the modes of communication differ, the purpose of relating the experiences of a time and place and women's adventure, independence and hopes to build a social and cultural atmosphere suited to the north, are shared between Native and newcomer women of the gold rush. Despite the developing strain between cultures and growing social class divisions, women experienced similar goals to survive, support their families, and find their place in the new northern frontier as First Nations people adjusting to social changes, and as newcomers adjusting to the harsh environment. Together, these two cultures of women worked differently to build their new environments to suit their cultural traditions and social needs, however shared this same goal. Despite the differences between women's oral and written histories, the frameworks they employ to understand and learn from their experiences is similar; both methods of documentation are reflections of a past that is interpreted in the present and contributes a greater understanding through analysis today of the important contributions of women to the settlement of the north.

Notes

¹ Julie Cruikshank, *Dan Dah Ts'edeninth'e: Reading Voices, Oral and Written Interpretations of the Yukon's Past* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre Ltd., 1991); Kenneth Coates, "Indians and the Mining Frontier," in Kenneth Coates, *Best Left as Indians: Native-White Relations in the Yukon Territory, 1840-1973*, (Montreal: McGill-Queens University, 1993), 32-46; Dominique Legros, "Oral History as History: Tutchone Athabaskan in the Period 1840-1920," in *Occasional Papers in Yukon History* 3, no. 1, (Yukon Tourism and Culture, 2007); Catherine McClellan, "Comparing Oral and Written Records: The Nineteenth Century," in Catharine McClellan and Lucie Birckel, *Part of the Land, Part of the Water: A History of the Yukon Indians* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1987), 59-76.

² Cruikshank, *Dan Dah Ts'edeninth'e*; McClellan, "Comparing Oral and Written Records"; Elijah Smith, *Together Today for our Children Tomorrow: A Statement of Grievances and an Approach to Settlement by the Yukon Indian People* (Whitehorse: Council for Yukon Indians, 1973), 1-22.

³ Julie Cruikshank, "Women's Lives in Athapaskan Narrative" (paper presented at the conference for the Canadian Institute for the Advancement of Women, Ottawa, Ontario, 1983); Julie Cruikshank, *Athapaskan Women: Lives and Legends* (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1979); Julie Cruikshank, Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned, *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Elders* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1990); Cruikshank, *Dan Dah Ts'edeninth'e*; McClellan, "Comparing Oral and Written Records," 59-76; Carolyn Moore, *Remembering Mac Bob: [The Life of a Kaska Woman of the Southeast Yukon]*, Stories Collected by Valerie McDonnell (Calgary: Rovere Consultants International Inc., 1997).

⁴ Legros, "Oral History as History"; McClellan, "Comparing Oral and Written Records," 59-76; Charlene L. Porslid, *Culture, Class and Community: New Perspectives on the Klondike Gold Rush 1896-1905* (Ottawa: Carleton University, 1994); Ken Spotswood, "Women's crucial contributions overlooked," in *The Yukon News*, Friday May 3, 1996.

⁵ Barbara E. Kelcey, *Lost in the Rush: The Forgotten Women of the Klondike Stampede*, ([S.I.]: B.E. Kelcey, 1989); Melanie J. Mayer, *Klondike Women: True Tales of the 1897-98 Gold Rush* (Athens: Swallow Press and Ohio University, 1989); Moore, *Remembering Mac Bob*; Spotswood, "Women's crucial contributions overlooked."

⁶ Cruikshank et. al, *Life Lived Like a Story*.

⁷ Smith, *Together Today for our Children Tomorrow*, 1-22.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Kenneth Coates, "Furs Along the Yukon: Hudson's Bay Company – Native Trade in the Yukon River Basin, 1830-1893," *BC Studies* 55, Autumn/NEED ISSUE NUMBER (1982), 50-78.

¹⁰ Ibid, 66.

¹¹ Ibid; McClellan, "Comparing Oral and Written Records", 59-76; Spotswood, "Women's crucial contributions overlooked".

¹² Sylvia Van Kirk, "The Role of Native Women in the Fur Trade Society of Western Canada, 1670-1830," *Frontiers* 7, No. 3 (1984), 9-13.

¹³ Porslid, *Culture, Class and Community*.

¹⁴ Coates, "Indians and the Mining Frontier," 32-46.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid, 78.

¹⁷ Porslid, *Culture, Class and Community*, 19.

¹⁸ Ibid, 32.

¹⁹ Ibid, 37.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Cruikshank, *Dan Dah Ts'edenintth'e*, 59.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid, 68.

²⁵ Ibid, 122.

²⁶ Ibid, 122.

²⁷ Ibid, 133.

²⁸ Cruikshank et. al., *Life Lived Like a Story*, 174.

²⁹ Ibid, 174-175.

³⁰ "Skookum Jim's Frog Helper," as told by Angela Sidney, in Julie Cruikshank, *Dan Dah Ts'edenintth'e*, 136-9.

³¹ Rudolph Murphy & Jane G. Haigh, *Gold Rush Women* (Seattle: Alaska Northwest Books, 1997), 11.

³² Ibid, 84.

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- ³³ Annie H. Strong, "From Women's Standpoint," in *The Skaguay News*, December 31, 1897.
- ³⁴ Murphy & Haigh, *Gold Rush Women*, 11.
- ³⁵ Martha L. Black, *My Seventy Years (as told to Elizabeth Bailey Price)*. Anchorage: Alaska Northwest Publishing Company, (1976), 20 & 43.
- ³⁶ *Ibid*, 47.
- ³⁷ Anna DeGraf, *Pioneering on the Yukon, 1892-1917*, ed. Roger S. Brown (Hamden: Archon Books, 1992), 3.
- ³⁸ *Ibid*, 24.
- ³⁹ Peggy Rouch Dodson, *Girl in the Gold Camp: A True Account of an Alaska Adventure, 1909-1910*, (Fairbanks: Beistline Enterprises and Epicentre Press, 1996), 121.
- ⁴⁰ Murphy and Haigh, *Gold Rush Women*, 47.
- ⁴¹ Cruikshank, "Women's Lives in Athapaskan Narrative"; Cruikshank, *Athapaskan Women*, 46.
- ⁴² Murphy and Haigh, *Gold Rush Women*, 22-23.
- ⁴³ *Ibid*, 4.
- ⁴⁴ Legros, "Oral History as History."
- ⁴⁵ Cruikshank, "Women's Lives in Athapaskan Narrative"; Cruikshank, *Athapaskan Women*, 48.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 49.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 52.
- ⁴⁸ Cruikshank, "Women's Lives in Athapaskan Narrative", 3.
- ⁴⁹ Cruikshank, "Women's Lives in Athapaskan Narrative".
- ⁵⁰ Spotswood, "Women's crucial contributions overlooked".
- ⁵¹ Kelcey, *Lost in the Rush*, 177.
- ⁵² Cruikshank, "Women's Lives in Athapaskan Narrative", 13.
- ⁵³ *Ibid*, 13.

⁵⁴ Porslid, *Culture, Class and Community*, 110.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 82.

⁵⁶ Jennifer Duncan, *Frontier Spirit: The Brave Women of the Klondike* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2003), 43.

⁵⁷ Duncan, *Frontier Spirit*, 59.

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