

KLONDIKE FAMILY LIFE

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THE FAMILIAR KLONDIKE PHOTOGRAPHS of dance hall performers, prostitutes, and grubby miners in the streets of Dawson do not show the daily life of the average mining family. Contrary to popular myth, the Klondike was, for many, a family affair. Hundreds of wives accompanied husbands on the long journey from prairie farms in Alberta and Kansas or from small businesses in Montreal, Minneapolis, and Vancouver. Other wives and children joined husbands once their mining claims were established. Still others found mates among their fellow stampeders, celebrating nuptials, and spending their first married days in the Klondike. Some stayed in the Yukon for the rest of their lives, while the remainder wandered off to seek their fortunes in other mining or real estate rushes in Canada and the United States before the First World War.

Families of all ethnicities – Native, French- and English-Canadian, American, British, Polish, Italian, and Swedish – sought their fortunes in the Klondike. They were an international and cosmopolitan group, and the conditions they faced were often unfamiliar. For women with small children, the challenges of frontier life were exacerbated by the long, dark winters, during which water for drinking, cooking, and washing was obtained by melting buckets of snow. Fresh milk for infants was often unavailable, and medical assistance for a difficult childbirth was often either prohibitively expensive or (outside Dawson City, on the mining claims) impossible to obtain. Yet women and children participated in the “Last Great Gold Rush” as eagerly as did their husbands, brothers, fathers, and uncles. These images attest to conditions of life that were far more difficult than romantic.

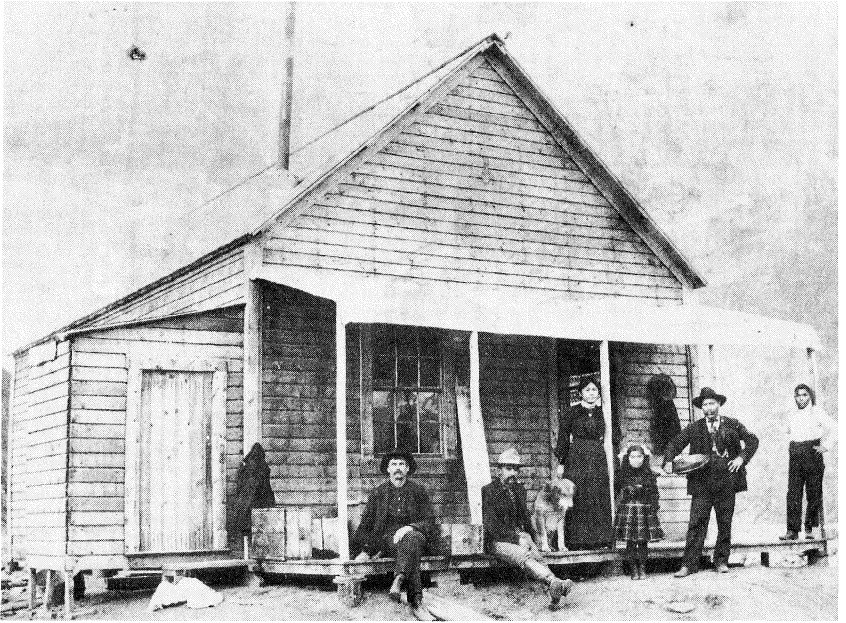


Figure 1: Skookum Jim and Family

Date: 1898

Photographer: Unknown

Credit: Yukon Archives, #88/58R Box 3 F5 #21, Skookum Jim Oral History Collection

Native families were an important part of Klondike society. Here, Keish (standing second from right), from the Tagish First Nation, poses with his wife, daughter, and extended family on the porch of his new house in 1898. In August 1896, Keish (known to non-Natives as Skookum Jim), his friend and brother-in-law George Washington Carmack (seated far left), and his nephew K̓ya Goox (standing far right) discovered the gold that started the Klondike gold rush. All of the men succeeded in becoming rich, as the house and their Victorian-style dress demonstrate. Even before the rush ended, both K̓ya Goox and Keish left Dawson City to return to their village of Carcross in the southwestern Yukon and, except for formal occasions (like photographs), most members of the family dressed in a combination of Tagish and Western attire.



Figure 2: (Moosehide Indian Women)

Date: 1898

Photographer: R. Goetzman

Credit: National Archives of Canada, # PA200048

Here, four unidentified Han women from the village of Moosehide pose in a Dawson photographer's studio in 1898. Contrary to popular myth, First Nations women did not engage in prostitution during the Klondike gold rush; rather, these women and their families continued to engage primarily in fur trade activities and, in a limited way, in mining. Taking advantage of the large nearby market, Native men often participated in market hunting, while the women found a ready market for their moccasins, mittens, and other winter clothing, both decorated and unadorned.



Figure 3 (mining cabin, two women, man, and infant)

Estimated date: 1898

Photographer: Unknown

Credit: National Archives of Canada, #PA168981

In many ways a family placer mine resembled a prairie farm. Indeed, the portrait here of a Klondike family dressed in their “Sunday Best,” posing with their belongings outside their mining cabin, is reminiscent of hundreds of similar images of nineteenth-century homesteaders and their “soddies” much further south. The washboard, frying pan, and axe are the same; indeed, they probably accompanied this family all the way from Kansas. The mud, cleared timber, snowshoes, rubber boots, and gold pan distinguish the location as distinctly Yukon.



Figure 4 (Group posed in front of sluice)

Estimated date: 1900

Photographer: Kinsey & Kinsey

Credit: National Archives of Canada, #PA168973

Often unpaid, women's labour was critical to the operation of a mining partnership. Here, a Klondike woman poses with her husband and his four mining partners on the claim. As her apron implies, this woman probably performed all of the domestic work for the group, including the cooking, cleaning, washing, and mending, but rarely engaged in any of the actual mining activities. The various cabins pictured behind the group reflect the separate living quarters for the couple and their predominantly male partners and hired hands.



Figure 5 (Woman, child, and infant on the Stewart River)

Estimated date: 1900

Photographer: Unknown

Credit: National Archives of Canada, #PA200055

The harsh climate and frontier conditions of the Yukon has a way of aging its women. Here, the work and worry of frontier motherhood show clearly in the face and hands of a woman old beyond her years, feeding her baby a few drops of precious milk from a whisky bottle. There were no documented midwives in the Klondike, and the few nurses resided in Dawson City. In the mining districts outlying Dawson, babies were most often delivered by their fathers or a friend who may or may not have had some medical training. Miners who had been veterinarians, dentists, and army medics found themselves in frequent demand in times of medical emergencies. In Dawson itself, the cost of a physician and hospital delivery could range from \$1,000 to \$1,500.



Figure 6 (Wedding, Methodist Church)

Estimated Date: 1899

Photographer: Unknown

Credit: National Archives of Canada, #c63164

The ratio of men to women was very high during the peak years of the gold rush, beginning at approximately 13:1 in 1898 and dropping to 6:1 by 1901. Single, marriageable women were even more scarce. Still, church and newspaper records indicate that Klondike weddings were common and widely celebrated occurrences — events of great importance to the community. The local papers reported at least one nuptial celebration per month throughout the period.



Figure 7 (Salvation Army Hostel)

Date: 1898

Photographer: Unknown

Credit: National Archives of Canada, #PA13302

The Salvation Army and the other churches of Dawson provided a wide range of social and educational activities for young Klondikers. Here, children join the celebrations surrounding the grand opening of the Salvation Army Hostel in 1898. By that date there were approximately 400 children living with their parents in Dawson, many of them attending small private schools or St. Mary's Roman Catholic School, which was established in 1899 by the Sisters of St. Anne from Montreal. The citizens of Dawson built the first public school in 1901.



Figure 8 (Dawson Residential Streetscape)

Estimated Date: 1904

Photographer: Unknown

Credit: National Archives of Canada, #PA13319

Dawson City changed quickly from a sea of canvas tents to a small metropolis of respectable homes. With the arrival of families came pressure to move the red light district away from the main part of town and to institute a system of public health and sanitation. By 1904, neat boardwalks, picket fences, and clapboard homes replaced ankle-deep mud, tents, and log cabins, providing an air of permanence and reflecting the pride that local residents began to take in their community.



Figure 9 (Mac's Grocery)

Date: 1898

Photographer: Unknown

Credit: National Archives of Canada, #c7068

For the short time that navigation routes were open (June through late September), Klondike families could purchase most of the foodstuffs and consumer products available in more southern metropolises. During the winter, prices rose substantially as stock dwindled, making it difficult for most families to afford even the most basic supplies and causing shortages of flour, beans, rice, and meat. The price of eggs, for example, could fluctuate from one dollar per dozen to one dollar per egg, depending on the supply. Fresh fruit and dairy products were wholly unavailable during the long Yukon winters.