

ALASKA'S GOLD RUSHES

"Gold!" It was a whisper that became a shout heard around the world when the Klondike Gold Rush began in 1896. But the Klondike wasn't the northland's first gold strike. One of Alaska's earliest gold rushes began 35 years earlier, near the community of Fort Wrangell.

Alexander "Buck" Choquette discovered gold on Buck's Bar on Telegraph Creek in 1861. Other prospectors soon arrived, but none were as successful as Choquette. Then, in 1872, Henry Thibert and Harry McCullough wearily stepped ashore at Fort Wrangell and displayed their poke of gold, mined from Dease Lake, in a region that came to be known as the Cassiar.

Word spread. More prospectors followed and by the next year, the tiny fur trading post on the bay became a bustling boom town. Steamboat business swelled as they worked their way up the Stikine River to supply miners. Hundreds of Indian guides also transported miners up and down the river in canoes. More than 3,000 people passed through Wrangell on their way to the Cassiar gold fields.

In 1879, John Muir visited and described Wrangell as "a rough place. No mining hamlet in the placer gulches of California, nor any backwoods village I ever saw, approached it in picturesque, devil-may-care abandon," he wrote.

Shortly thereafter, however, the prospects dwindled, the wheels of the steamers stopped turning and miners abandoned their sluice boxes to rot along the shores. The Cassiar returned to its wilderness state.

But that was not the end of the Stikine Trail. In 1898, Klondike fever hit, and merchants in Victoria and Vancouver promoted the Stikine Trail as the only practical route to the Klondike. But the promotion was purely a case of false advertising, as thousands of would-be prospectors discovered. Some never made it past Cottonwood Island, where a motley crowd of at least a thousand sorely misled prospectors spent the winter of 1897-98 waiting for breakup. Stikine City, as the site was referred to, grew upon the snow, and nearly all traces of its existence were wiped out the next spring.

Numerous gold strikes followed, all over Alaska and the Yukon, and gold mining continues to fortify the economy of the Last Frontier. Golden threads still bind Alaska and Yukon Territory. Perhaps it is as Robert Service, the Klondike poet, wrote in "The Spell of the Yukon:"

"There's gold, and its haunting and haunting;
It's luring me on as of old;
Yet it isn't the gold that I'm wanting
So much as just finding the gold.
It's the great, big, broad land 'way up yonder,
It's the forests where silence has lease;
It's the beauty that thrills me with wonder.
It's the stillness that fills me with peace."