

EXCERPT

by Jennifer Duncan

FRONTIER

THE BRAVE WOMEN OF THE KLONDIKE

GOLD! THAT ONE WORD HAD THE POWER to seize the minds of men and women so that they thought of nothing else. Butcher, baker, corset-maker, few were immune to its glitter of riches, fame, excitement. In the grip of gold fever, tens of thousands from all walks of life, from all over the world, left their homes, their families, their professions, to seek their fortune in the Klondike from 1896 to 1900. Swept up in the euphoria, they gambled everything on their dreams of mansions, news headlines, and the thrill of adventure. After an arduous journey through an extreme climate and a demanding wilderness, a few stumbled on exactly what they were looking for. Others lost what little they had. Some lost their lives. But all became the stuff of legend.

The frontier mythology of the Klondike Gold Rush, created by writers like Robert Service and Jack London, celebrates the lone prospector, hungry for gold, struggling courageously against



The author in Peabody's Photo Parlour, 1998. Duncan Collection. Photograph by Janice Cliff.

the harshest elements, mightily wresting his fortunes out of the frozen ground; the gregarious gambler, hungry for good times, strewing his nuggets about rowdy saloons as he buys the boys another round, calling for his favourite dance hall girl; and the misfits—tramps and remittance men and outlaws, hungry for everything. If there are women in these tales, they are gold diggers, not gold prospectors. At the time of the Gold Rush, women were called euphemistically the “delicately nurtured” and the feminine mystique was one of fragility and fainting fits. Who could believe such creatures could brave the Yukon frontier?

But women were there in force, if not in equal numbers to the men then in equal spirit. Their story begins not with the intrepid adventurers who joined the stampede to the goldfields. It 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

SPIRIT



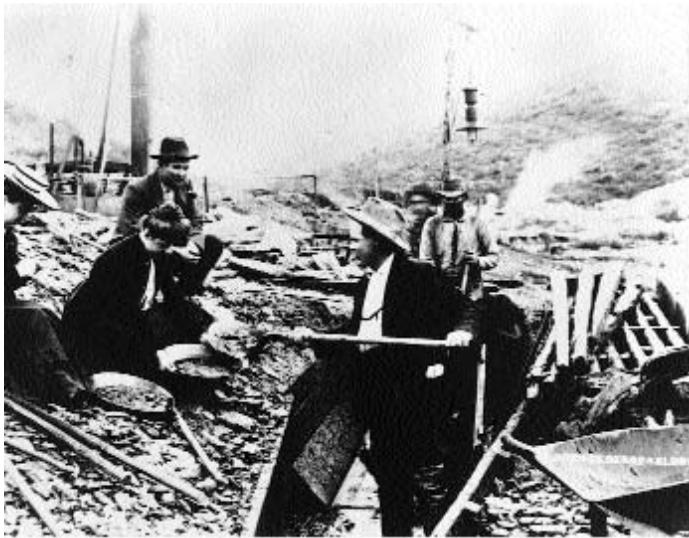
Klondike Kate as a pansy. Yukon Archives, National Museum of Canada Collection, #818.



A California studio portrait of Shaaw Tl̓aa, known as Kate Carmack outside her First Nations community, wearing her famous gold nugget necklace, 1898. Yukon Archives, James Albert Johnson Collection, 82/341 #21

EXCERPT FRONTIER SPIRIT

A fleet of First Nations women paddling to trade with steamships in 1900. Yukon Archives, H.C. Barley Collection, Vol. 1, #4771.



Ethel Berry and sister Tot Bush pan gold at the Berry mine. Yukon Archives #2426.

Martha Louise Munger Purdy Black, socialite and outdoorswoman. Yukon Archives, Martha Louise Black Collection, #3253.



women of the First Nations: the Inuit and the Gwich'in of the north, the Han of the west, the Tutchone of the central region, the Kaska of the east, and the Tagish and Tlingit of the south.

On March 18, 1898, the Seattle *Post-Intelligencer* offered the simple message: “NO PLACE FOR WOMEN.” Under this headline, a man recently returned from the goldfields was quoted: “Women are utterly unfit to fight the battle out there. People in the East have not the least conception of the hardships that have to be endured by those who succeed in reaching the country, not to speak of

They came for the same reasons the men did, out of greed, curiosity, or sheer cussedness.

the horrors of the trail leading into the country . . . It might be set down at once as impossible for women to get into the Yukon by the passes.”

Undaunted, women formed their own Gold Rush clubs to plan expeditions. One of these societies was called the Woman’s Klondike Expedition Syndicate and another, founded by Chicago patent lawyer Florence King, was named the Woman’s Alaska Gold Club. Club members were enthusiastic suffragists who had already broken through barriers to become professionals in their fields.

One of the unique characteristics of the Klondike Stampede is how it attracted men and women from all walks of life: rich and poor, educated and illiterate, urban and rural, skilled and unskilled, single and married. While the images of dance hall girls and prostitutes became synonymous with the Gold Rush, the female stampeders were actually from many different occupations: nurses, doctors, nuns, teachers, scholars, journalists, domestic servants, laundresses, seamstresses, cooks, shopkeepers, restaurant and hotel owners, entrepreneurs, and entertainers. They were from English and French Canada, the southern and northern United States, England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Australia, France, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Russia, Japan, and China. Some were Asian and African-American, although the majority were of European descent. And they came for the same reasons the men did, out of greed, curiosity, or sheer cussedness.

They would need all the cussedness they had just to get to the goldfields, deep in the interior of the Yukon Territory, far east of Alaska’s Pacific shores and far north of the Rocky Mountains. There were different routes, each one long and life-threatening. ▣