

DIGGERS ON THE KLONDIKE

P R O J E C T O U T L I N E

The Klondike Gold Rush (1897-1899) in Canada's remote northwest was the last great gold rush of modern times. Over a thousand Australians and New Zealanders, from Otago to Kalgoorlie, set out on the harrowing journey to the goldfields in the subarctic Yukon Territory.

The film draws on a decade of international research by Dr Robin McLachlan (co-producer and co-director): he has identified over 700 individuals, men and women from Australia and New Zealand, who successfully reached the Klondike. **DIGGERS ON THE KLONDIKE** explores their experiences, both individual and collective.

The film tells an untold story. While there is a vast literature on the Klondike Gold Rush, it is almost entirely America-centred and in the case of cinema more Hollywood than history. The Australians and New Zealanders are rarely mentioned. However, Dr McLachlan's research has revealed that these men and women have their own unique stories - waiting to be told.

For the Australians who went, on the eve of Federation, their time on this distant, foreign goldfield contributed to a heightened sense of Australian nationalism. They identified themselves to others as Australians, not as Queenslanders or Victorians. The same understanding was realised by their New Zealand compatriots. Almost a generation before their shared experience of Anzac, these Australians and New Zealanders responded to some of the same challenges offered on Gallipoli and the Western Front, not least those of identity, perseverance and resourcefulness. The Klondike awoke a realization that to be Australian or New Zealander was to be different from Americans, Canadians or any of the other dozens of nationalities gathered on the world stage of the Klondike goldfields.

The journey to the Klondike is itself an epic story involving frozen mountain passes and deadly rapids on the Yukon River, unlike anything previously experienced by Australians coming from a land of sluggish muddy rivers and sunburnt plains.



Miles Canyon on the Yukon River, 1898. Mick Crow and Jim Connolly (both from Western Australia) earned Yankee dollars piloting boats through the rapids for timorous Americans who preferred to walk, rejoining their boats downstream (Photo: Yukon Archives)

Only a handful found their fortune in gold. To have reached the Klondike, though, to have been a “Stampeder”, was a badge of honour.

The Australian and New Zealand role in the development of the Canadian goldfield was of some significance, both to the host nation and the prospectors themselves. Drawing on fifty years of collective goldfield experience, unmatched by any other nation on the field, this involvement included not only contributing to the practicalities of gold mining, but also lobbying for changes to Canadian mining laws and resisting official corruption. Reflecting the history of Australian goldfield militancy, Australians were at the forefront in representing grievances to government authorities, earning the respect of others and the displeasure of the authoritarian North West Mounted Police.

Many came away from the Klondike with a heightened awareness that “we do it better back home”. This view was widely shared by others nationals on the Klondike, marking arguably for the first time that Australia and New Zealand were identified as global leaders, not only in mining but equally so in grassroots democracy.

In Dawson City, Australians and New Zealanders were at the forefront in setting up community institutions and in providing for the full spectrum of needs on an isolated goldfield community – from merchants and doctors to auctioneers and hotelkeepers, as well as contributing to those of the demi-world of Paradise Alley. One successful entrepreneur, a Melbourne woman, revealed a business acumen that took her from selling silk lingerie to hotel keeping and mine ownership, In sports, Australian men made a name for themselves as boxers, both heavyweight and featherweight. One of the best “marksmen” on the field was a young lady from New Zealand. Another woman, an Australian, gained fame as a music hall singer, whose story has for too long been eclipsed by that of an American hussy, the so-called “Klondike Kate”.

Their Klondike stories are just a few of those to be told, for the first time, in our film.

In expanding our sense of national identity, we need to understand more fully the diverse ways, beyond the battlefield, in which earlier Australians and New Zealanders both experienced the world and, in turn, made an impact on that world. Our film will help audiences to better understand and value this wider history to be found through the lens of the Klondike.



The restored Palace Grand Theatre, Dawson City

HOW THE STORY WILL BE STRUCTURED AND TOLD

The 1890s was the age of the camera: a wide selection of still photographs and rare original film footage, available in archives in Canada and the USA, will form a crucial part of this film. We will analyse these visual images to extract historical detail and use them to evoke life, with both its dangers and its routines, on the Klondike over a hundred years ago.

Because the long northern winter is spent in a frozen darkness, music entertainment in isolated cabins played a significant part in Klondike life. Year round, whether by dogsled or on foot, miners travelled to Dawson’s music halls. A vast library exists of music composed and sung at the time communally and in music halls. We will dig into this archive for original Klondike songs to enrich the atmosphere of our narrative.

Our story will also be told through the Stampeders’ own words – left for posterity in letters home as well as through diaries and post-rush memoirs. To date, Dr McLachlan has created a digital archive of several thousand individual items.

Our structure will be built around the detailed stories of six or seven men and women whose record is strong. Through the interweaving of their individual stories, we will tell an over-arching meta-narrative about the collective experience of all Australians and New Zealanders on the Klondike.

Some of our individual Australian narratives may include the following:



Beatrice Lorne

an established singer on east coast Australia who went alone to the Klondike to escape a failed marriage. Successful on Dawson's musical hall stage, she was joined by her young daughter, Connie, one of the few Australian children on the Klondike.

Beatrice Lorne was the best-known Australian woman on the Klondike. Her adoring miners rewarded her with the accolade of the "Australian Nightingale" and not a few gold nuggets. (Photo: the Yukon Archives)



Aloysius Joyce

from Tasmania was shipped off to the Klondike after he fathered a child with a married woman. Aloysius, with a few ounces of gold in his poke, returned in time to enlist for the Boer War. His daughter went on to become Dame Enid Lyons.

Aloysius Joyce in Klondike garb: a souvenir photo for the folks back home, taken in a Vancouver photo studio on his way to the Klondike. (Photo: Joyce family)



Australian flag designed in May 1898 by Charlie Lloyd to fly on his boat travelling down the Yukon River to the Klondike. (Photo: National Museum of Australia)

Charlie Lloyd

from north-eastern Victoria, an experienced prospector of some fame, who thought, wrongly, the Klondike might be the new El Dorado. On seeing Americans putting the "Stars and Stripes" on their boats for the Yukon River journey, he designed his own "Australian" flag for his boat. (Thanks to Dr McLachlan, that flag is now in the National Museum of Australia - a story to be told in the film.)



The massive No. 4 Dredge of the YCGC (Yukon Consolidated Gold Corporation), in operation on Bonanza Creek until 1959; an Australian, Andy Baird, was YCGC's financial manager.

Dave McGregor

from Coonabarabran, perhaps the grumpiest Australian on the field, with never a good word for anything Canadian, but stayed on for years, grumbling and moaning, and only returned home to die.

Andy Baird

from Ballarat, made his fortune on the Klondike through perseverance and hard work. He multiplied that fortune many fold as a pioneer in mechanized gold dredging, becoming a key figure on the Klondike.

FOOTAGE FROM THE PRESENT-DAY

With an element akin to “Who Do You Think You Are”, we will film present-day scenes with descendants of Stampeders as they are shown evidence of their family’s role in the Klondike, or as they show us memorabilia of their Stampeder ancestor. These present-day encounters will enrich our narrative as it proceeds and add a moving contrast to the archival record.

And woven throughout the film will be our own present-day journey in the footsteps of the Stampeders, through the spectacular landscape of the Yukon River to the Klondike Goldfield and the hub of the Gold Rush, Dawson City, as it now stands today. In the company of Dawson City locals and Yukon historians, Robin McLachlan will re-visit sites associated with the Stampede - areas that are now in the precincts of Parks Canada's Klondike National Historic Sites, and which offer not only a wide selection of conserved and restored buildings but also locations now reclaimed by nature.

OUR GOAL

Focussing here on the Australian character of our film, we intend that this film will put the Australian role in the Klondike into the mainstream of Australian historical consciousness.

Essentially, this will not be an ephemeral TV documentary about an arcane obscurity. We are far more ambitious and hope to create a widespread understanding of not only gold rush history but also the emergence of Australian national identity and Australia’s place on a global stage. We especially want to contribute to the emergence of a new Australian historical narrative that is not driven by war and special interest groups or great individual men and women: but rather a narrative that talks of ordinary men and women with no institutional backing, no structure behind their high adventures, and no museum or memorials dedicated to their memory.

This is their story; it is our history.