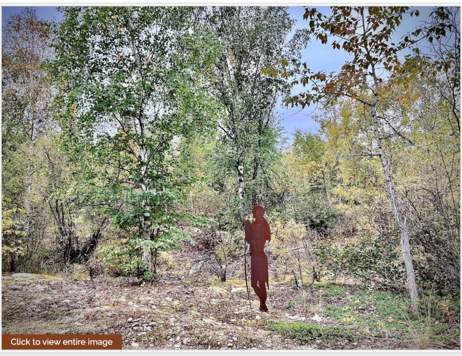
How Dawson City Is Telling A Deeper Klondike Gold Rush Story

By Jennifer Bain
October 31, 2022



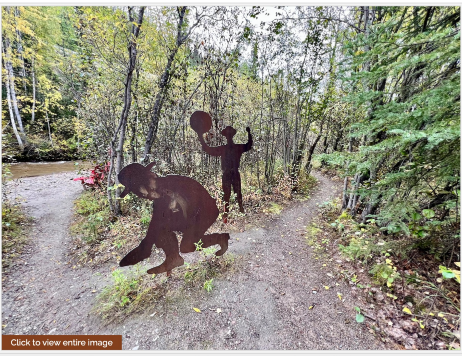
This weathered sheet metal silhouette along the Discovery Claim Trail by Bonanza Creek speaks to the Indigenous presence in the Yukon before the Klondike Gold Rush/Jennifer Bain

There he stands in the woods as you start walking down the Discovery Claim Trail to the creek where Skookum Jim Mason, Káa Goox (Dawson Charlie), Shaaw Tláa (Kate Carmack) and George Carmack discovered gold in the Yukon in August 1896 and sparked the Klondike Gold Rush.

He's not real, of course — just a life-size, sheet metal silhouette that has weathered nicely and blended in with the foliage. What's important is that this long-haired Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in man with the bow and arrow is here to convey that the gold rush didn't happen in an empty wilderness but in the place that he and his ancestors have called home for thousands of years.

Bonanza Creek here near Dawson City is part of the traditional territories of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, the people who live at the mouth of the Tr'ondëk (Klondike) River. It was called Rabbit Creek until gold was found, but to the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in who hunted caribou and small game in the area it was Ch'ëchozhù Ndëk — "a thin layer of moose fat" in the Hän language.

Parks Canada, with help from the Yukon government, created this silhouette when it started to shift its perspective on the discovery story back in 2010. Three more silhouettes along the trail at Discovery Claim National Historic Site show prospectors with gold pans and wide felt hats. Fun as they might be to take selfies with, they're meant to represent the newcomers and settlers who arrived and deeply impacted the land and lives of the First Nations people.



Two more steel silhouettes by Bonanza Creek show the prospectors that arrived in the 1890s/Jennifer Bain

I'm walking down the short Discovery Claim Trail on the Klondike Experience's City and Goldfields Tour 22 years after these four silhouettes were erected and 126 years after the start of the world's most famous gold rush. Guide Mike Ellis starts the tour by painting a vivid picture of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in as they were before the gold rush and as they are now.

It has been a long time coming, but people seem ready to widen their perspectives about history, learn about the ongoing impacts of colonialism and have long overdue and uncomfortable conversations. The five national historic sites in the Dawson City area that make up Klondike National Historic Sites are — to varying degrees — ready to oblige.

On the front porch of the opulent Commissioner's Residence, heritage interpreter Bennie Allain starts the new "Red Serge, Red Tape" tour with a gentle question. What we think of when we hear the word Klondike?

"Gold rush," a few people say simultaneously.

"Gold rush — yeah, that's the big one," Allain agrees.

"Ice cream bar," says one woman and everyone laughs at the reference to the mainstream dessert brand Klondike.

"Certainly, the ice cream bar is a bit of a good metaphor," Allain muses, "because it's kind of a sugar-coated version of the Klondike that we know. It's a sugar-coated version of what actually went on here."

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A Parks Canada tour of the Commissioner's Residence is no longer just about the opulence of the time/Jennifer Bain

Built in 1901 "to present an image of elegance and confidence," the Commissioner's Residence is part of the Dawson Historical Complex National Historic Site, a collection of several dozen buildings in this artsy wilderness town of about 2,300 people.

Before we enter the grand yellow home with white trim that once housed the territory's head of state, Allain tells us this tour is unique for Parks Canada for "really turning the head on the colonial history of the place that it is in. In this program, we're actually investigating the effect of the gold rush and what happened afterwards on Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in."

The word Klondike is actually a mishearing of the word Tr'ondëk, he points out. Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, loosely translated, means people hammering stones at the mouth of the river. They came to a summer fish and hunt camp in the area called Tr'ochëk and used to hammer stakes into river beds to make weirs to catch salmon.

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Visitors are no longer impressed by what they see inside the Commissioner's Residence/Jennifer Bain

Stepping in the residence, we're encouraged to speak freely instead of gushing over the opulence. Some find the main floor masculine and are put off by animal mounts on the walls. Others are offended to think about how all the fancy decor would have been brought in just for show, and how many staff it would have required to run a place like this.

"It's a visual, physical object that kind of symbolizes the entire idea of people coming here to extract resources from the land," says Allain as we study one taxidermied animal. "Very, very strange for the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in to observe this going on — a very different relationship to the land."

We stop on chairs arranged in the parlour to hear a recording between Anglican Bishop William Bompas and Northwest Mounted Police Inspector Charles Constantine. The script was made from actual letters between the men and the government in Ottawa, and Allain was one of the voice actors. He warns that the tape uses the language of the day.

Bompas feels the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in have been manipulated into selling their land and is keenly aware that their hunting and fishing grounds are under threat as thousands of prospectors descend on Dawson. "Well bishop, there is no progress without change," sniffs Constantine, who proposes moving "the Indians" to an island.

"I'm charged with creating law and order in this community and a future for all of Dawson, for the hard-working white people in particular," Constantine snidely admits. "The whites are the providers and workers in this country and should therefore enjoy its privileges. White people create all the jobs and all the opportunities here. The Indians can go work for them."

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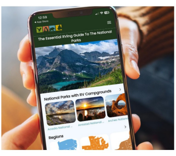
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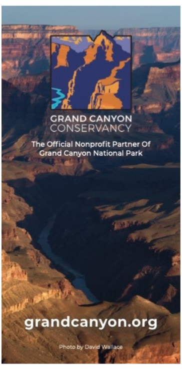
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Listening to a conversation between people representing the police/government and church in Dawson City provokes discomfort/Jennifer Bain

When the recording ends, Allain asks "did you find any part of that in particular to be uncomfortable?" The conversation that ensues among visitors from Canada and the United States is much longer than the three-minute tape.

We learn that the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in were indeed forced to move several miles downstream from Tr'ochëk to Moosehide Village, but now mainly live in Dawson.

The Red Serge, Red Tape tour ends upstairs as we gather around Indigenous artist Faye Chamberlain's "Cutting Through Red Tape" dress instead of gawking at fancy bedrooms and bathrooms. The dress is made of red duct tape fashioned into regalia. Fringes along the back are covered in words like oppression, abuse, injustice, confiscation, violence and genocide. Fringes on the front are covered with words like hope, dignity, trust, love and forgiveness.

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Parks Canada heritage interpreter Bennie Allain on the \

"After being encased for centuries in a chrysalis of subjugation, red tape and injustice, Indigenous people like a butterfly's wings, are spreading into the light and showing the world their true beauty, with a voice that is stronger than ever," Chamberlain writes in an artist's statement. "And today I have come to realize, that life can only be understood by looking back at the trail our ancestors broke for us, but must be lived forwards."

Allain is pleased with the conversations he has sparked on this tour. He thanks everyone "for engaging" and we spill back out into the September sun, eager to learn more.

Dawson City was the "Paris of the North" when it was the epicenter of the last of the great gold rush as some 30,000 prospectors flooded the area. Now it's what Parks Canada calls "a living town amid historic gold rush buildings." Travelers can't get enough of the unpaved streets, wooden boardwalks and vintage false-front buildings.

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Dawson City today is a vibrant town full of heritage buildings/Jennifer Bain

Most people just explore with little thought to how things are run. It takes a minute to wrap my head around Parks Canada's massive role here overseeing the five national historic sites that make up Klondike National Historic Sites.

Just outside of Dawson, there's the Discovery Claim and the Dredge No. 4 National Historic Site. In town, there's the Dawson Historical Complex, Former Territorial Courthouse National Historic Site and the S.S. Keno National Historic Site.

The Commissioner's Residence gets its own guided Parks Canada tour, but I also take the Historic Town Walking Tour to see the inside and outside of some of the key buildings. For do-it-yourselfers, there are interpretation panels outside of each.

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Dressed in period costume, Parks Canada heritage interpreter Miriam Behman leads a tour through buildings that form the Dawson Historical Complex National Historic Site/Jennifer Bain

Parks Canada heritage interpreter Miriam Behman starts with a land acknowledgment and stresses that the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in "still live here today and will always live here." She speaks of how they used the river before newcomers and settlers arrived, and how we "talk about the gold rush that was maybe four years when the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in have lived here for maybe 10,000 years."

"It's such a short amount of time that's celebrated in this time when the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in have lived here so much longer," she points out.

As for the 1896 "discovery" of gold, she says the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in always knew gold was here. "I like to shift the view of the word discovery. Instead of thinking about `discovery,' perhaps we can think `commodification.'"

Dressed as a common woman from 1898 in a long peacoat with velvet, lace and feathers, Behman regales us with stories of gold, gambling, whisky and prostitution, while taking us into a restored bank, post office and saloon. She talks about why so many artists like her gravitate to Dawson, and slides in the interesting fact that elementary students here all take Hän language classes.

KENO
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The S.S. Keno has been a fixture on the Dawson waterfront since 1960/Jennifer Bain

The next day, I meet Behman again for a tour of the S.S. *Keno*, a steam-powered paddlewheeler. None of the gold rush steamers survived, so this is a typical vessel from 1922 that was built to transport silver, lead and zinc ore in other parts of the Yukon until the Alaska Highway was built and made the riverboats obsolete. The *Keno* was the smallest in the British Yukon Navigation Company's fleet but it does a good job telling the story of gold rush river transportation.

"It's kind of an amazing privilege to be able to go aboard these boats," Behman admits.

One of the many stories she brings to life once we enter the *Keno* is that of Frank Slim, a Yukoner who lived from 1898 to 1973 and was forced to give up his First Nations status in order to become the territory's first Indigenous river captain. He guided steamers throughout the Yukon, British Columbia and Alaska. In 1960, he was given the honor of piloting the *Keno* on her last voyage to Dawson's waterfront, and yet we don't nearly as much about him as we should.

Danger!
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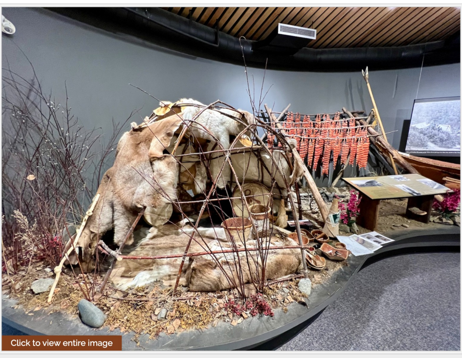
Dredge No. 4 is two-thirds the size of a football field and was once used to extract gold from the ground in the Yukon/Jennifer Bain

The Former Territorial Court House isn't open when I visit, so the last Parks Canada spot I visit is Dredge No. 4. Standing eight storeys high on the west bank of Bonanza Creek, the wooden-hulled dredge commemorates the large-scale corporate mining that took over here after the gold rush.

From 1899 to 1966, Parks Canada says, huge machines like this dug the ground of the Klondike region to extract gold, forever changing the landscape. Now the area is home to modern placer mining.

Parks Canada heritage interpreter Sue Taylor knows the dredge inside and out and shares deep insight into its work life from 1913 to 1940, and its life as a tourism destination ever since. But for a final word about the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, I study the pamphlet that Parks Canada hands out about the dredge.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At the Dänojà Zho Cultural Centre, you can learn about how the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in used to live, and how they live now/Jennifer Bain

The guide speaks of how the "hunters of caribou and moose, fishers of salmon and keen traders" were well known for their hard bargaining. "Though displaced by the influx of stampeders, the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in adapted and utilized western influences, and shared their knowledge readily." Some joined the wage-earning economy, cutting wood for the sternwheelers, piloting riverboats and working on the dredges. Today, the brochure says, the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in "are an integral part of the community and remain a resilient, self-governed people, keeping their language and traditions alive."

To see this for myself, I drop by the Dänojà Zho Cultural Centre, watch a short welcome film, try two foraged teas and tour the self-guided gallery.

The film speaks of how the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in love their land, their lives and the spirit of their people. It warmly welcomes visitors to their traditonal territory. I learn that after a century of "occupation, abandonment and threats from mining activity," they regained ownership of Tr'ochëk in 1997 and have been working with archaeologists ever since to uncover the history of their ancestors.

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View from the Midnight Dome of Dawson City and the region/Jennifer Bain

On my way out of town to the airport, I follow a winding road up a mountain to the Midnight Dome for sweeping views of Dawson City, the Klondike Valley and the Yukon River.

There's just one problem. A colorful sign details how this spot came to be a formal place to see the midnight sun on June 21, 1899 with nuts, candies, cigars, soft drinks and the raising of both British and American flags. It talks about how Dawson ministers once held midnight church services on the Dome, which is a knob of metamorphic rock common to the area south of the Tintina Trench fault line. It relays how a road was built between Dawson's graveyards and the Dome in 1925 to accommodate steamboat passengers on one-day sightseeing tours.

But there's one glaring oversight. There is no mention of the fact that this land is the traditional territories of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, and there is no equally colorful story about how the first people on this land used this spot before 1899.

While You're In Dawson City:

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Klondike Kate's Cabins can be found in downtown Dawson City/Jennifer Bain

Fly: I flew from Toronto to Whitehorse and on to Dawson City on Air North, which is 100 per cent owned by Yukoners, including the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation. The airline flies from other Canadian gateways, including Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton and Ottawa.

Stay: I stayed in Dawson's historic downtown at one of the private log cabins offered by Klondike Kate's Cabins, which is open seasonally from May to September.

Eat: BonTon & Co. is a provision shop/café/restaurant that makes traditional dry-cured salamis using only Yukon-raised meats. Annabelle's Noodle House has a creative, rotating menu, and tucked behind it — through a hallway to the washrooms — is the Sweet Sweet Yukon shop.

Do: Established in 1971, Diamond Tooth Gerties Gambling Hall is Canada's oldest operating casino. Nightly cancan floor shows feature "Gertie and her Gold Rush Girls" dressed in Klondike period style.

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