Preserving the Past On the Trail of '98

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By Jeffrey Murray
and Jennifer Hamilton

Photo by Jennifer Hamilton

Opposite page: This rusting power toboggan found near the summit is an example of one of the more sophisticated means of hauling supplies over the Chilkoot. Photo by Jeffrey Murray. Above: A tin can is catalogued by student archaeologist Murielle Nagy.

Although it presented some impressive obstacles, the Chilkoot Trail easily offered the greenhorn Stampeder, or "Cheechako" as he was also known, one of the cheapest and quickest routes into the Yukon interior in the Klondike gold rush of 1897-1898. This was a consideration not to be taken lightly since the majority of the participants were desperately seeking relief from the prolonged economic recession that was strangling the world during the last decade of the nineteenth century.

Although the trail was really only used for a two year period, at least 20,000 would-be miners faced its formidable challenges. Their trek over the Chilkoot might have been more tolerable if the Stampeders had only to contend with transporting a few personal effects and their mining equipment, but because of the isolation of the Yukon, each Stampeder was also required to provide his own food. Ignoring this requirement meant facing possible starvation, since Dawson City was already in the midst of a severe shortage. Indeed, the situation was serious enough that, by January 1898, Canadian officials began policing the border to ensure each person entering the Yukon carried a year's food supply, amounting to at least 1,150 pounds. When the food supplies were combined with the axes, shovels, gold pans, tents, clothing, and other necessities for staking a claim in the Klondike, the average Stampeder was usually left with an outfit weighing close to 2,000 pounds.

Although a number of entrepreneurs established freight stations at various points on the Chilkoot to help Stampeders relay their goods along the trail, many simply could not afford this service. These unfortunates faced the grueling task of breaking their outfit down into 50 to 60 pound loads and carrying it on their backs. They could expect to climb the 1,121 m. high pass and travel the entire length of the Chilkoot 30 to 40 times, covering more than 1,300 km, before everything would be safely stored at the trail's end, in either Lindeman City or Bennett.

The Chilkoot Trail is well known for both the diversity and density of artifacts left behind by the Stampeders in their mad dash for the gold fields. Most of these artifacts lie completely visible on the ground surface and are scattered throughout the entire historic corridor. As well, there are more than 10 major sites along the trail where the artifact scatter increases substantially. These areas correspond to favoured stopovers where the Stampeders would temporarily cache their supplies before relaying them further along the trail. Two additional sites, Lindeman City and Bennett, were semi-permanent tent encampments where

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The supply cache at the summit of the Chilkoot Pass. Similar cache areas were spaced at regular intervals along the length of the trail.

the Stampeders sometimes spent as much as an entire winter building the boats which would carry them down the Klondike River system to Dawson City.

Surprisingly, the most serious problem facing the historical remnants of the Chilkoot Trail is not that caused by the harsh northern environment. Although natural forces are certainly taking their toll, such forms of depreciation are usually gradual. Over the long term, natural forces are generally not as damaging as the acts of vandalism deliberately or accidently perpetrated by the modern day hiker. Recently a camp fire was found in which hikers collected and burned a Klondike sled. In another incident hikers removed the wooden supports from the stone cribbing used by the Stampeders as the anchor point for an aerial tramway causing the entire structure to collapse. Although efforts have been made to protect the cultural heritage of the Chilkoot Trail, this activity has certainly gone on in the past and, unfortunately, will likely continue in the future. It can be expected to escalate with the increase in visitation that is likely to occur once the area is declared a national historic park.

Since it is almost impossible to remove the threat of such destructive forces, certain measures can be taken to minimize loss of the Chilkoot's history through the preservation of the *information* associated with the remains. By making an inventory of the cultural resources, an archival data base can at least be created which will provide future generations with a record of what was present on the trail at a given moment in time.

During the 1984 summer field season, Parks Canada sponsored eight weeks of archaeological investigations to assess the feasibility of such a project. The investigations concentrated on recording the features and artifacts at three of the larger sites on the trail: Lindeman City, Bennett, and Long Lake. These three sites were selected because it was felt they would present a reasonable representation of the cultural resource base and the problems to be encountered. As well, Lindeman and Bennett are likely to be included as part of any future development that Parks Canada may initiate and, consequently, should be investigated immediately.

The three sites examined in 1984 were divided by a grid system. By using survey instruments, a series of squares, three metres wide, were established across the sites. Each square on the grid was given a unique number and its coordinates tied into a central point. The latter then served as a permanent reference point by which all recording could be spatially related. When the artifacts were removed from the ground it was possible to use the grid number to relate the find back to its original position.

Normally, establishing a site grid is a straightforward process. But most of the archaeological sites on

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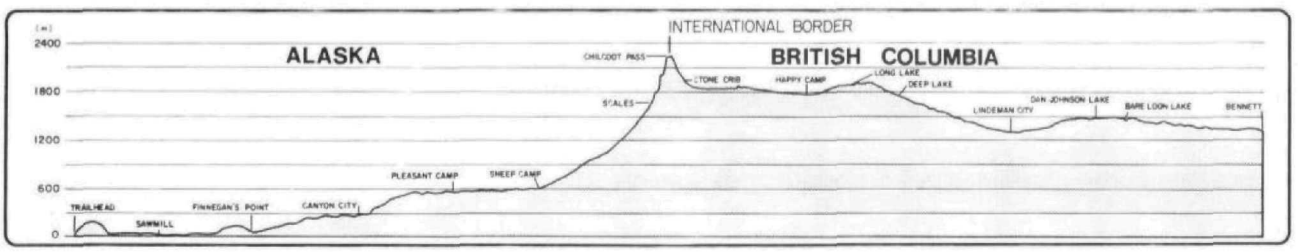
A panorama of the tent city at Bennett, 1 June 1898.

the Chilkoot Trail are located in mountainous terrain which presented a number of logistical problems, especially where the weather was concerned. In some cases, it was necessary to contend with less than ideal living conditions and very poor visibility due to cold driving rain and fog.

Once a site grid was established, a team of two to four people would systematically traverse the area looking for features and artifacts. When a feature was found, each was assigned a number and was photographed. Then it was described in terms of its size, construction methods, and associated artifacts. The artifacts in turn were placed in the inventory computerized coding system. Of the more than 3,100 artifacts recorded, only a representative sample of 200 were collected; the remainder were left as originally found. Generally, artifacts were collected only if they were one of a kind or if they were appropriate for a museum display.

The majority of features recorded at the three sites on the Chilkoot Trail were tent platforms. These were generally distinguished by a rectangular alignment of rocks which had been used to secure the base of a canvas tent. Often a space or doorway was visible in the alignment and sometimes it was even possible to distinguish a small rock platform that had probably supported a wood burning stove.

Privy pits and garbage dumps were sometimes found closely situated to the tent platforms. The dumps usually provided a good sample of the different types of



Map by D. Elrick

Photo by Jeffrey Murray

Many of the buildings on the trail, like this old root cellar, are in an advanced state of decay.

Photo by G. Fitik

Bottles used by the Stampeders. Broken glass litters the trail.

This pile of cattle skulls at Bennett was one of the most curious finds. Each skull has a single bullet hole in the forehead.

Photo by Jeffrey Murray

Wooden artifacts, like this old wagon, are in peril from erring hikers seeking firewood.

Photo by Jeffrey Murray

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A set of tram wheels at the Homan River saw mill where the Stampeders cut lumber for Bennett's boat building industry.

Portable canvas boats cached high on the pass near the Alaska border. Why the boats were never used remains a mystery.

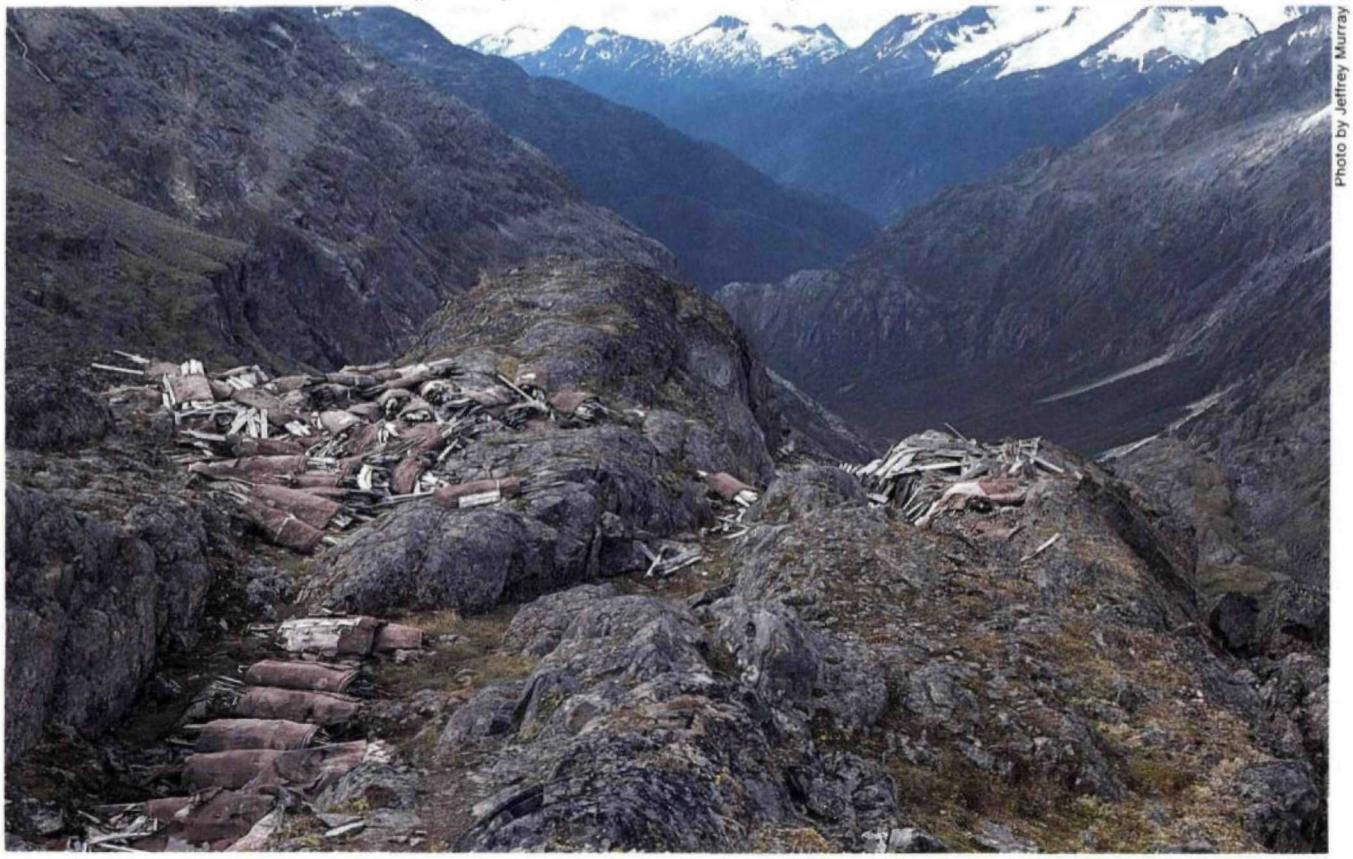

Photo by Jeffrey Murray

food carried by the Stampeders into the Klondike. Interestingly, of the ten dumps recorded, each was characterized by only a few different product types and brand names. For example, more than six different canned milk brands were found by the archaeologists at various points along the trail; however, only one or two of these types were found in each dump. This distribution suggests each dump was only used by a certain number of Stampeders and also has implications with regard to their buying habits and taste preferences.

Eventually the information collected on the artifacts and features of the Chilkoot will be used to re-examine the day-to-day life of the Stampeder. In the past, most studies on the gold rush have focused on the more sensational phenomena connected with the event, such as the exploits of individual miners or the more dramatic episodes surrounding the trek into the Klondike. Unfortunately, little attention has been given to the Stampeders as a group. While archival sources may contain numerous descriptions of the hardships faced by various individuals on the Chilkoot Trail, the historical documents generally have little to say about the more mundane aspects of day-to-day life at Lindeman City and Bennett where most people had to wait for spring break-up before continuing their journey to the gold fields. Almost nothing is known on how these camps were organized. Were there attempts to divide the camps according to the ethnic and social backgrounds of the Stampeders? What kinds of public services were maintained by the communities? Was there any recognition of streets or paths? What sanitary precautions were taken? What did the community do for recreation?

As already mentioned, the Chilkoot presented some impressive obstacles for the would-be miner. All his material goods, including most foods, had to be imported into the region, and because of its mountainous terrain, some rather ingenious methods were developed by which they could be transported over the trail. It is possible that these constraints also influenced the types of goods they brought with them and possibly also the methods by which products were packaged and carried.

When the Chilkoot artifact inventory is completed, it will be possible for the archaeologist to compare this record with that provided by historical documents. Just as the modern day consumer selects only certain items from the wide variety of goods available in the market place, the nineteenth century Stampeder must have also preferred only certain products. It should prove particularly rewarding for the archaeologist to identify not only the various types of goods selected by the Stampeder but also to establish why these were purchased over others.

This task will entail a comparison of the artifacts found on the ground with the multitude of products offered for sale by the West Coast outfitters in their catalogues from the late nineteenth century. Once this comparison is established, it should be possible to ask some pertinent questions about life on the trail. For example, what food types did the Stampeder prefer; how were these foods packaged; are the artifacts found on the trail today reflective of only nineteenth century technological limitations in the packing industry; or are these products also representative of other restrictions such as the size of the group with whom the Stampeder preferred to travel?

It is possible that, in his haste to reach Dawson City, the average Stampeder was not particularly selective of the goods he carried. He may have bought anything and everything the West Coast outfitters offered in order to spend as little time as necessary in this endeavour. The faster he could get to the gold fields, the sooner he would be able to stake his claim. Alternatively, the Stampeder may have preferred to keep his capital investment to a minimum in order to maximize potential profits. Despite the variety of goods that were available for purchase, only the cheaper items may have been preferred. A minimal investment would, of course, help to reduce losses in the event the Stampeder was unlucky and would also serve to increase profits if a substantial claim was discovered.

Establishing an artifact inventory in an area the size of the Chilkoot Trail is by no means an easy task. The logistical problems of keeping a crew in an isolated area for extended periods can alone prove arduous, even without the added responsibilities of contending with fragile artifacts and the numerous records that such a project generates. But these problems prove insignificant when compared to the long term benefits that will be obtained. Not only will the project be contributing to the preservation of a heritage which faces eventual depreciation and irretrievable loss, it will add new pages to our understanding of an event that shaped the development of our Northern frontier. ♦

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