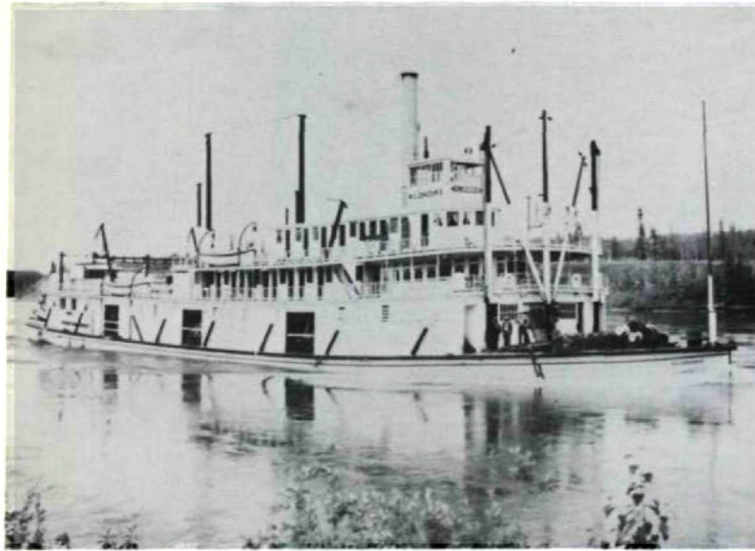


THE S.S. 'KLONDIKE II'

By W.J. McBurney



Claude Hegg Collection, Parks Canada

OVER TWO THOUSAND MILES IN LENGTH, the Yukon River originates at Lake Lindeman, B.C., flows north into Alaska and empties into the Bering Sea. The Russians first travelled the river in search of furs and in the early 1840s the British established several Hudson's Bay Company posts along this ideal transportation route.

Stern-wheeler activity increased from 1880 and throughout the succeeding sixteen years. It was, however, the great Klondike gold discovery of 1896 which dramatically increased the need for mass transportation. Stern-wheeler fleets suddenly expanded under several

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Photographs are from the Parks Canada Collections. Those in colour are of the restored stern-wheeler on site at Whitehorse.

The S.S. 'Klondike II' (above), under full steam on the Yukon River where she served from 1937 to 1955.



The refurbished Steamer 'Klondike' was opened to visitors in the summer of 1981.

commercial and trading company names. The population boom in Dawson and the surrounding Klondike region established the stern-wheeler as the vital link between the Yukon's settlements and the outside world.

Up until the mid-1950s the stern-wheeler remained the mainstay of the Yukon River transportation system. In the span of almost one hundred years, over two hundred and fifty of these practical, yet beautiful, vessels plied the river during the open season. The seasonal aspect of the

Frank Coghlan Collection, Parks Canada



Cordwood being loaded aboard at a riverside wood camp. It was stowed both port and starboard to balance the boat in the water.

river ultimately caused the stern-wheeler's demise. Crews had to work furiously during the five-month navigation season in order to clear the stockpiled ore produced during the winter period. In 1947, the stern-wheelers could not handle the increased production from the Keno Hill Mine. The mining company pressed for an all-weather road and when it was completed in 1951, trucks transported the one major product that the boats had depended on in order to survive. Slowly, the need for transportation of freight by river became unnecessary. When further construction of all-weather roads connected other isolated areas, the era of riverboats ended.

In an attempt to keep one last stern-wheeler in operation, the British Yukon Navigation Company, in 1952, extensively refurbished *Klondike II* as a cruise and cargo ship. The plan proved premature to capitalize on the Yukon's tourist industry. In August 1955, *Klondike II* steamed into Whitehorse on the end of her last Yukon run. She was winched out of the water to join her sister ships, which were beached beside the river on which they had served. Parks Canada has now restored the S.S. *Klondike II* to ensure that this romantic symbol of the Yukon's rich and colourful heritage is not relegated to the past.

The S.S. *Klondike II* was modelled after her predecessor, the S.S. *Klondike I* which sank in 1936 after the captain attempted to run a bend in the river. Following engine salvage, a new vessel was built during the winter months. Like the *Klondike I*, she was designed to carry a cargo of 300 tons, a feat that previous stern-wheelers had only accomplished by pushing a cargo-laden barge ahead of the prow. The latter method proved time-consuming and too costly to the British Yukon Navigation Company. The *Klondike II* would be able to make the same run in the same time with an equal amount of freight contained in her hold. In the spring of 1937 she was launched from the Whitehorse shipyards and began her career.

She then took her namesake's place on the river and followed the same Whitehorse-Dawson return schedule. A massive 210 feet in length, the ship had a crew of 25 men. They were responsible for manoeuvring her bulky hull around numerous hair-pin bends, through narrow channels of rapids and over the ever-changing sand bars of the river. While all of these feats were being accomplished with apparent ease, she graciously played hostess to as many as thirty passengers. They were offered hotel-like services, ranging from sleeping facilities to full dining conveniences.

The 460-mile run downstream to Dawson usually took forty hours with one stop for wood. When the cargo of machinery, hardware, personal luggage, mail, household goods and general food supplies was unloaded, she would begin her return trip. Seventy miles upstream from Dawson, she would make a stop at the mouth of the Stewart River. Here, bags of silver-lead ore were hand-trucked aboard the ship by crew and longshoremen. Four days and six woodings later, against a current which averaged six knots, she would reach Whitehorse, heavily laden with her mineral wealth. The longshoremen would unload the ore, reload general freight and prepare the ship for a repeat performance.

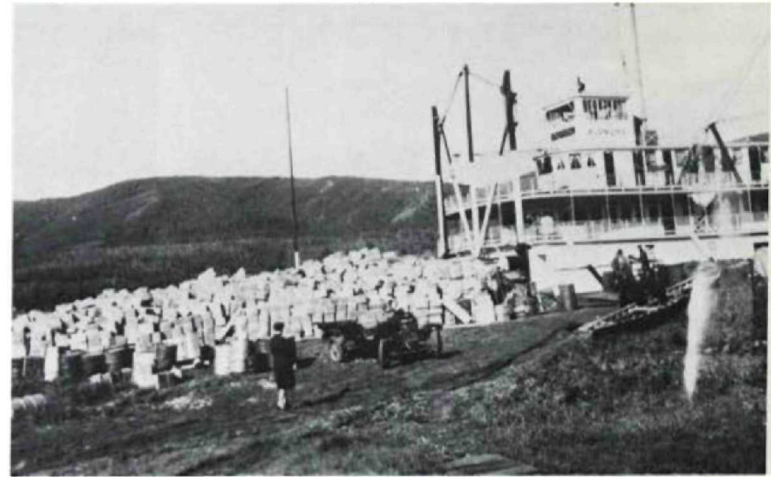
The task of the interpretative curator of the *Klondike II* called for constant communication and collaboration with the research historian whose records and organized data were put to use. Through years of dedicated detective work, the curator located the thousands of items required to dress this 'Lady' in the manner to which she was accustomed.

It was this research through volumes of documented material that provided the information on river transportation (company policies, procedures and technicalities of the river-boat operation). Hundreds of period photographs were borrowed and copied for visual proof of specific, previously undocumented details. From an individual photo enlargement, small details became evident, and unanswered questions were resolved. Miles of interview tapes with ex-crew members told of personal accounts which illuminated the life-style of this era in the Yukon. The men who worked and loved the riverboats



The wheel house, outfitted with reproductions of the original carpets, airtight heater, and marine hardware.

Freight delivered to a riverbank stop.



Public Archives of Canada (C-25221)



Office of the purser who was postman, bookkeeper, company agent and freight controller for waystops on the river journey.



Observation room on the forward saloon deck, the common meeting room where passengers enjoyed the spectacular Yukon scenery.,



Harold Nickolson Collection, Parks Canada

Pantry stores located on the saloon deck, port side. The 'Klondike' galley crew who prepared delicacies that ranged from 'French pastries to fresh salmon bellies'.



The dining room, saloon deck, looking aft. The ship's officers and first-class passengers were served three full-course meals in this elegant setting of the 1930's. (Above) The galley.

were invited to actively assist in the telling of an exciting and romantic part of their lives in Canada's history.

'How did passengers dress for travel in such rugged territory?'

'It was rugged, sure, but it was very civilized at the same time. Everything was available. Ladies wore fashionable hats, fox fur collars. It was quite common for someone to see friends off at dock with an armload of Dawson City flowers. There's lots of daylight up here in the summer, you know, and the plants and flowers are incredible in size.'

'What were some of the typical leisure activities on board?'

'Oh, people might just sit in the wicker chairs in the observation lounge, or out on the deck chairs and watch the scenery. And passengers always liked to play shuffleboard.'

'Did the deck-hands and the firemen have a hard job?'

'Well, you had to be strong, you know. The crew served eight hours on and eight off, while underway. Cordwood could be pretty heavy if it was still green and it was pretty hot work. The stoker had to pick up the four-foot log, hold it while he opened the fire door, pitch it in and close the door pretty quick. They were always at you — the pilot and wheelhouse crew — to keep the pressure up when you were under full steam. You didn't have time to lollygag around when you were on duty.'

'What did the cargo deck look like when it was full of freight?'

'Well, just a minute now. The boxes and cases would be six to eight feet high, the full length of the deck. You might have a shipment of lumber, sacks of flour and sugar, and lots of mail bags. Especially lots of mail bags when the new Eaton's catalogues came up. Shortly after that, there would be parcels ordered by everybody. A few weeks later, there would be lots of parcels being returned to the mail-order office again. People would order all sorts of crazy things. Not much need for a bicycle up here when you live on the river and don't have any streets or roads. Anyway, there would be cordwood piled here, both port and starboard, twenty cords at a time. You always had to balance the boat in the water, you know. There was this little metal marker that had to hang plumb. You get it off too much and the Captain'd be yelling at you, or Claude Hogg — he was the first mate. The paddle had to ride even in the water, you know, in order to push the boat right or else you'd just go around in circles. Here's a picture of the deck-hands loading cordwood at a wood-camp. Sometimes the wood truck would get out of hand going down the gangplank and you'd go over the side with a whole load of logs. That would slow you down, but they could load sixteen cords in forty minutes.'

'With all that hard work, the crew must have really built up an appetite. What was the cooking like on board?'

'Oh, the food was terrific! We'd have the same meals as the passengers and the menus were as good as you'd

want. Exotic northern delicacies like moose steaks or steamed salmon bellies were offered from the galley, but the crew could also get something almost anytime they'd want.'

'What was the attitude amongst the crew? Were they friendly or were there personality conflicts?'

'Oh no, there was no trouble to speak of. Now and then there would be an argument of some kind, but it was usually all ironed out. The crews were usually a terrific bunch. It was hard times in those days and everyone was pretty lucky to have a job and these jobs were pretty exciting. We did a lot of kidding and had a lot of laughs. I remember one time when Johnny did a laundry and hung all his stuff up on a line to dry. Well, one of the deck-hands came along and took one of each of the socks off the line. When Johnny came back to take down his clothes, he thought that the wind had blown away the missing socks. So he says, "Well, hell, one sock of each colour is no damn good!" So he threw them all overboard.'

Hundreds of such details were revealed. In many instances memorabilia and souvenir items were donated for display purposes or used as prototypes for multiple reproduction. Linens, china, cutlery, ashtrays, chairs, towels, menus, mirrors, dinner gongs, uniform buttons, brochures, legal documents, employment offers and custom carpets were but some of the items tracked down. As more people became involved through lectures or interviews, there also became a public awareness that their seemingly trivial or unimportant item was perhaps a very important link in the total story.

On Canada Day, 1 July 1981, the restored Steamer Klondike was officially opened to the public. The former captain, William Bromley (now deceased) and several of the original crew members came back to the Yukon to take part in the ceremony. The reminiscences of the captain and crew had provided valuable first-hand documentation for the furnishings and as they viewed their old familiar surroundings, they agreed that nothing seemed to have changed since they were aboard many years before.

In cabin quarters, personal belongings have somehow miraculously reappeared. Both crew and passenger cabins appear to be occupied, but the tenants are nowhere in sight. Some of the doors were closed. Perhaps one should walk softly so as not to disturb a deck-hand during his off-duty sleep. The baker has just stepped out for a moment. His work counter is dusted with flour and pies are in the making for the next meal. What else is to be served in the simple, elegant dining room? A card placed on each table describes the menu for a dinner in 1937. Here, waiters have not quite finished the table-setting arrangements. Potted ferns are suspended from the ceiling and glass vases are filled with fresh northern flowers. Back on deck, shuffleboard paddles stand abandoned against a bulkhead, awaiting players for a game on the saloon deck court.

The once loved and cared-for paddle-wheeler lives again, with much of her original style and spirit. ◆