

# *From Trail to Tramway*



THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF CANYON CITY

## CREDITS

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# Acknowledgements

A great many people have contributed to the success of the Canyon City Archaeology Project. Since 1994 the project has been a joint initiative of the Yukon Heritage Branch, Department of Tourism and Kwanlin Dün First Nation with the support of the Yukon Conservation Society and MacBride Museum.

The principal investigator at the site was T.J. Hammer, of Simon Fraser University, with the intermittent assistance of Greg Hare and Ruth Gotthardt of the Yukon Heritage Branch. The research undertaken at Canyon City was the basis for T.J. Hammer's Master's thesis.

Our understanding of the traditional land use of the Canyon City area comes from the oral history work conducted by Kwanlin Dün community researchers Donna Hagen and Sweeney Scurvey and from the earlier research of anthropologist Catharine McClellan. We gratefully acknowledge the valuable contribution of elders Mrs. May Hume, Mrs. Julie Joe, Mrs. Lucy Wren, Mrs. Mary James, Jimmy G. Smith, Edwin Scurvey, Edward Gordon, Mrs. Virginia Vallevand, John Suits Louie Smith, Rose Charlie and Ronald Bill. We are also grateful to Lawrence Cyr for sharing his knowledge of the early days.

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photo credit: Yukon Archives. H.C. Barley Collection. #4665

Freight hustlers at Canyon City

# Introduction

Situated in a scenic clearing on the banks of the Yukon River, lies the abandoned settlement of Canyon City. Although best known for its role in the Klondike Gold Rush of 1898, the history of Canyon City extends far into the past. When told in its entirety, it is a history which embraces the formation of the land, the First Nations of the Yukon, the first Canadian and American explorers of the region and some of the most memorable images of the Klondike Gold Rush.

The human history of Canyon City is defined by its location — near the head of Miles Canyon on the upper reaches of the Yukon River. The canyon and the perilous White Horse rapids that claimed the lives of Gold Rush stampeders and thwarted Yukon River sternwheelers were also a major navigational hazard for Yukon's original people, long before the first white man. A deeply worn foot trail running along the canyon's ramparts and through the centre of the abandoned townsite provides a silent testament to the power of the river and the thousands of travellers who sought the safety of this shore, since time immemorial.



In 1994, archaeologists began deciphering the mingled histories of Canyon City buried in the shallow soils of the site. Hundreds of square metres of the townsite were excavated, thousands of artifacts were uncovered and little-known aspects of Yukon history were brought to light. First Nation elders were interviewed, archives were searched for historical data and underwater divers explored the submerged features at the townsite. All of these sources were called upon to write the story of Canyon City.

The Canyon City Archaeology Project was a joint initiative of the Yukon Heritage Branch and Kwanlin Dün First Nation, in partnership with the Yukon Conservation Society and MacBride Museum. Research of the site was begun as part of a commemorative project celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Klondike Gold Rush. Over five seasons, students from local First Nations, high schools and colleges were employed at the site excavating and interpreting this chapter of Yukon history, and many thousands of local residents and tourists hiked to the site to share in the sense of discovery.





## Bad Water

MILES CANYON AND THE WHITE HORSE RAPIDS WERE THE MOST hazardous obstacles on the upper reaches of the Yukon River. Hundreds of boats were lost here during the Klondike Gold Rush. The number of people who actually died shooting the rapids during the Gold Rush is debatable. One source states that "fully 200 were drowned", while a more conservative estimate places the number at five. Even First Nation travellers, whose light dugout and bark canoes could navigate the treacherous waters, had maintained portage trails around the worst of the rapids. The fast water was finally tamed in 1959 with the construction of the hydroelectric dam near White Horse rapids and the formation of Schwatka Lake.



Above, Shooting Miles Canyon with an empty scow, 1899.

photo credit: Emile Forrest Collection, Yukon Archives 80/60 PHO 131 #6



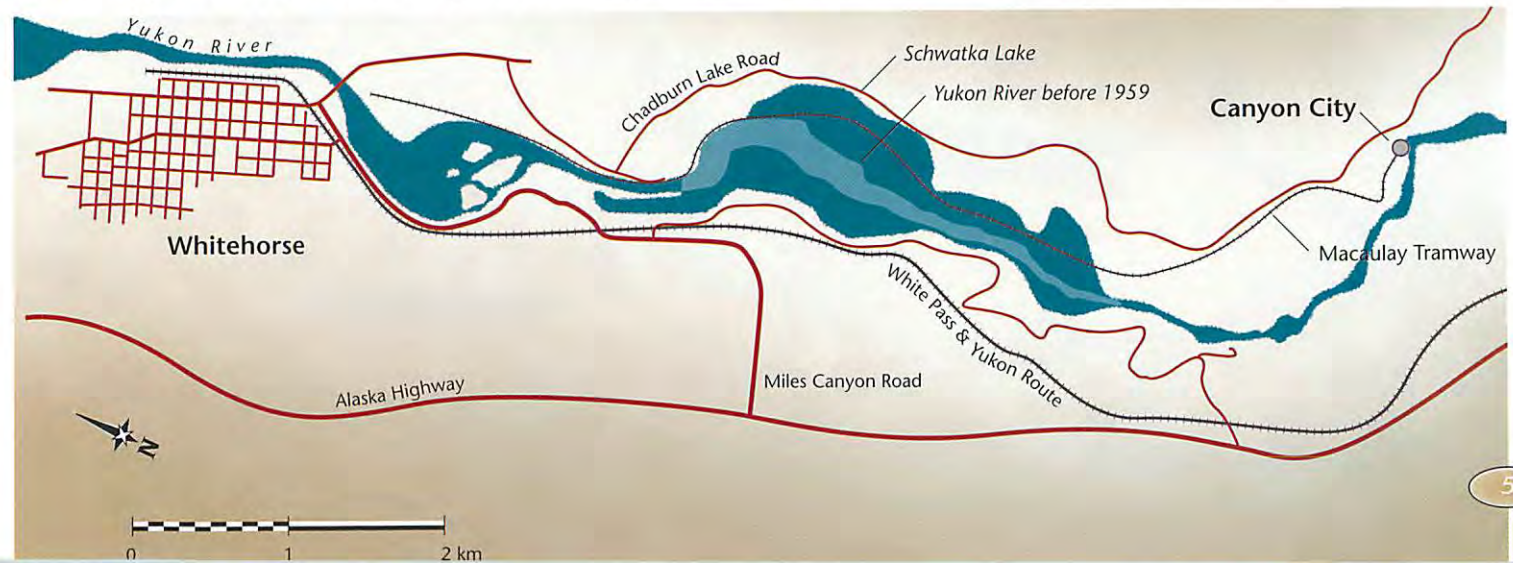
# When the world was young

The landscape around Canyon City was shaped by a variety of geologic forces. Eight million years ago, lava flowing from a small vent west of McCrae laid down a thick deposit of basalt, most obvious in the vertical walls of Miles Canyon today. For the past two million years, the landscape of the Whitehorse valley has been shaped and reshaped by the forces of the Pleistocene Ice Ages. Repeatedly, glaciers built up beyond the peaks of most of the local mountains — they scoured the land, obscuring old features and creating new ones. When the glaciers melted, the Whitehorse valley was filled with the frigid waters of a proglacial lake.

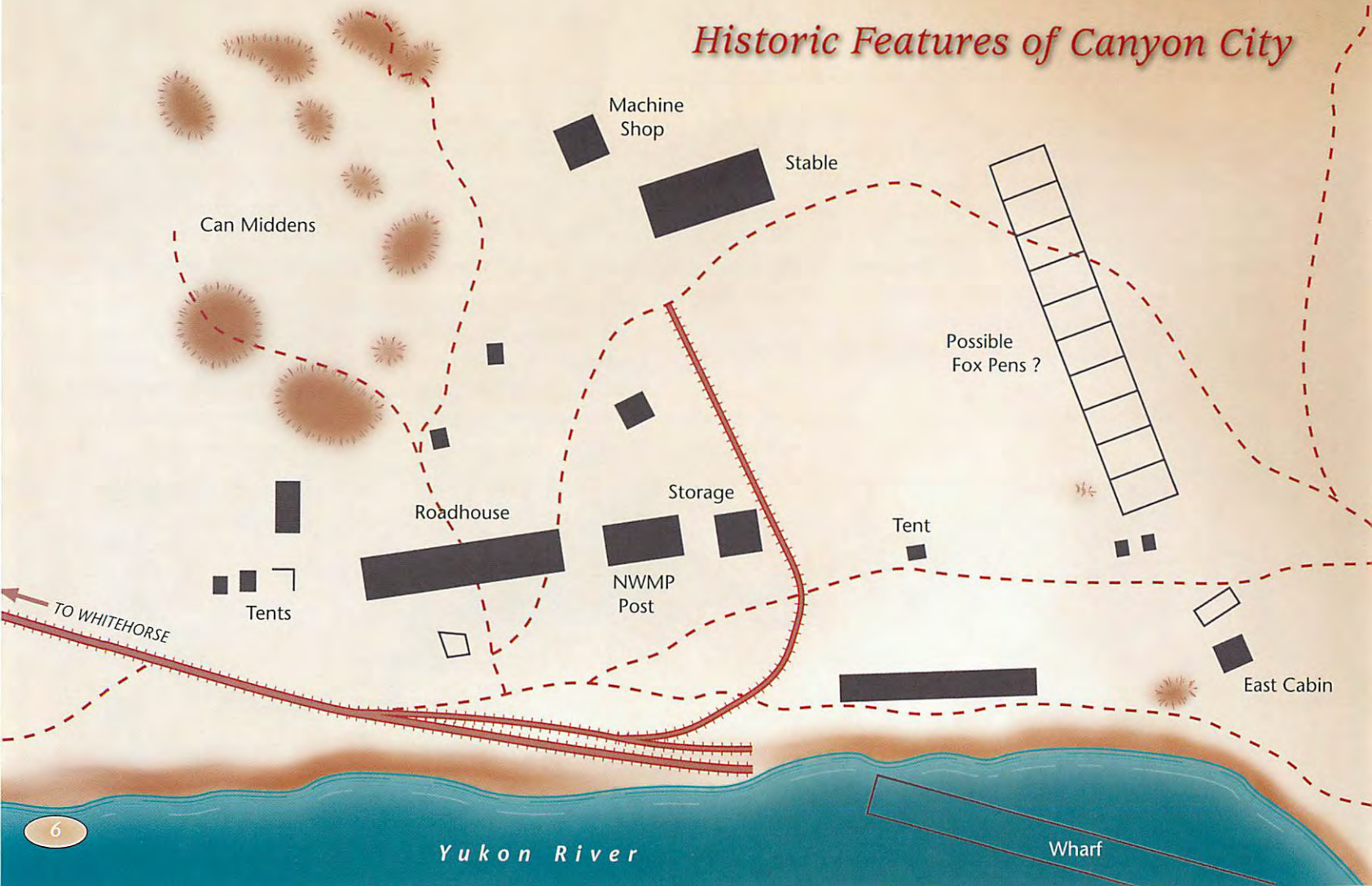
The last Ice Age ended about ten thousand years ago in the Whitehorse

area, but many reminders of it can still be seen today. The prominent clay bluffs of the city are actually the lake-bottom deposits of that last great glacial lake. After the lake drained, the newly re-born Yukon River cut its way slowly down through the glacial tills and silts to the basalts of Miles Canyon. Eventually, the river cut through this last stone barrier, creating the modern landscape and the river that we know today.

The end of the Ice Age also brought the beginning of human settlement in the area, as hunters from the ice-free lands of Beringia moved southward. We are not certain when the first people arrived in the Whitehorse valley, but they were almost certainly present in the highlands which surrounded the glacial lake 8,000 or 9,000 years ago.



# Historic Features of Canyon City



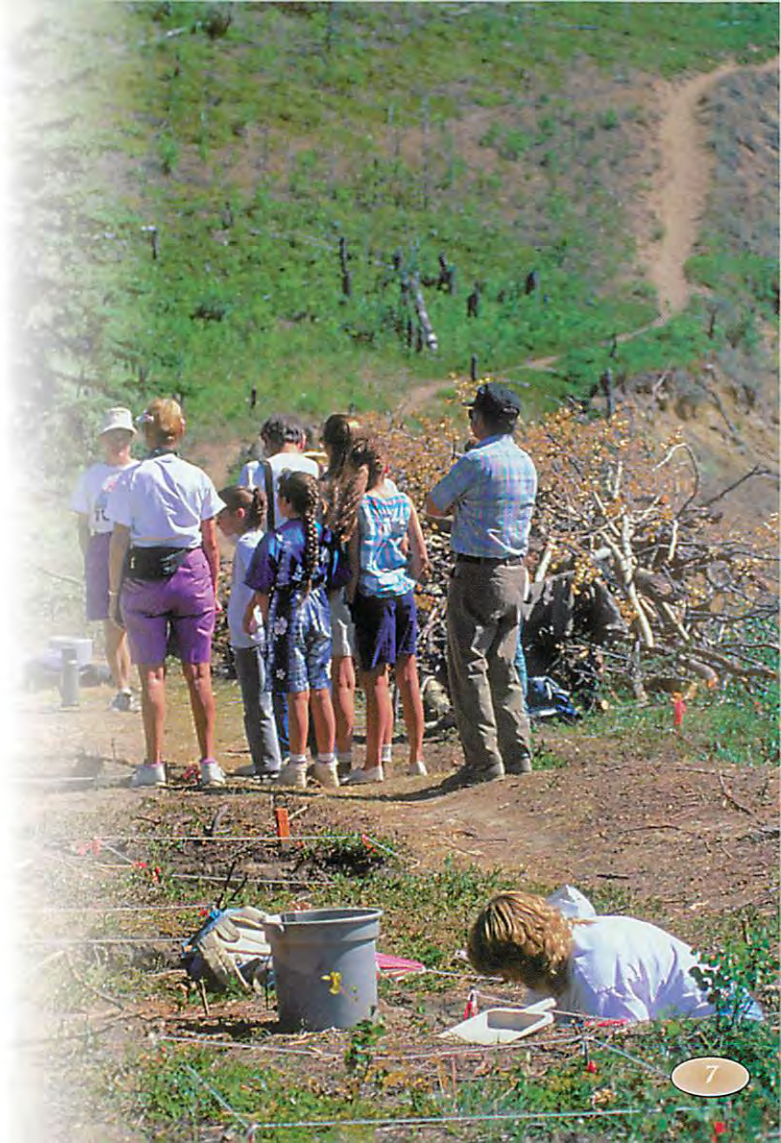
# On the trail to Lake Laberge

The first definite evidence of people living at Canyon City dates to about 2,500 years ago. Stone tools such as skin scrapers, sharpened flakes and an unusual style of spear point indicate that First Nation people regularly camped at the site several thousand years ago, likely to harvest fish at the river's eddy, intercept caribou and moose crossing the river and hunt sheep on nearby Grey Mountain. Young men probably tested their paddling skills and the maneuverability of their dugout and bark canoes in the treacherous water of the canyon, called 'Unilyin in the Southern Tutchone language. Kwanlin Dün elders tell us that the indelible foot trail that follows the Yukon River and cuts through the site was the traditional trail from Marsh Lake to Lake Laberge. There is no way to date the trail, but it was likely in use even during the early days of First Nation occupation of the site.

Archaeological excavations showed that the cultural evidence for these early people was dispersed over a very large area, perhaps indicating that many people had gathered here during the summer fishing seasons. Tools made from the volcanic stone obsidian attests to far-flung trade networks extended over great distances. We know the approximate age of the site from radiocarbon dates taken on charcoal from an ancient cooking fire.

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*The trail rising in the background is the traditional trail from Marsh Lake to Lake Laberge. Today, this trail is extensively used by hikers, cyclists and site visitors.*



# Stone Tools

FOR EXCAVATORS WORKING AT CANYON CITY, THE POSSIBILITY OF finding stone tools buried beneath the historic features at the site added a special sense of excitement. The stone tools that were found were not limited to a small cluster but were distributed over a broad area. The stone projectile point shown here poses special problems for archaeologists. Stylistically, it appears to be of an ancient design known as Agate Basin, that was in use more than 7,000 years ago. At Canyon City however it was found near charcoal that dated to only 2,600 years old.



Above, Agate Basin-like point

# From the Oral Histories

The next chapter in the history of Canyon City comes more from the oral history of Tagish and Kwanlin people than from archaeological investigations at the site. Nearly fifty years ago the well known anthropologist Catharine McClellan recorded elders' stories telling of important fish camps in the vicinity of Miles Canyon. The village site of *Kwanlin* was located below the White Horse rapids but the exact locations of other camps are uncertain. During the Canyon City Archaeology Project, elder Mrs. May Hume reported that her father Canyon Johnny, along with Whitehorse Billy, used to own an important fishing eddy near Miles Canyon where they used to gaff salmon and set fish traps. She said that Indian people from throughout the area, including Hutshi Slim (father of Frank Slim) came each year to take part in the harvest.

However, with the arrival of the first prospectors to the headwaters of the Yukon, the traditional way of life for First Nation people was to change irrevocably.



# Seeking advice from Elders

AN IMPORTANT COMPONENT OF THE CANYON CITY ARCHAEOLOGY Project was the oral history work conducted by Kwanlin Dün community researcher Donna Hagen. Elders were interviewed and many provided special insights into traditional land use activities in the Canyon City area. Mrs. May Hume's father worked at Canyon City during the Gold Rush and Mrs. Julia Joe remembers buildings in the area when she was a young girl. They are shown here with Azalea Joe, great-granddaughter of Mrs. Joe and one of the principal crew members for four years at the site.



*Above, Kwanlin Dün elders Mrs. May Hume, Mrs. Julia Joe, field assistant Azalea Joe and archaeologist T.J. Hammer.*

*Left, First Nation Fish Camp—The fish camp at Canyon City probably looked similar to this 19<sup>th</sup> century fish camp from the Yukon River in Alaska.*

photo credit: Alaska State Library, Charles Horton Metcalf Collection. 84-136

# The first Prospectors

Since the advent of the fur trade, some of the finest pelts in North America came from the subarctic forests of the interior Yukon. But no trading posts were ever established in the upper reaches of the Yukon River. Coastal Tlingit jealously guarded the steep mountain passes leading into the Yukon to protect their trade monopoly with interior people. It was not until 1880 when the U.S. Navy negotiated a treaty with the Chilkat Tlingit that the first white explorers — prospectors in search of gold — were allowed access to the southern Yukon.

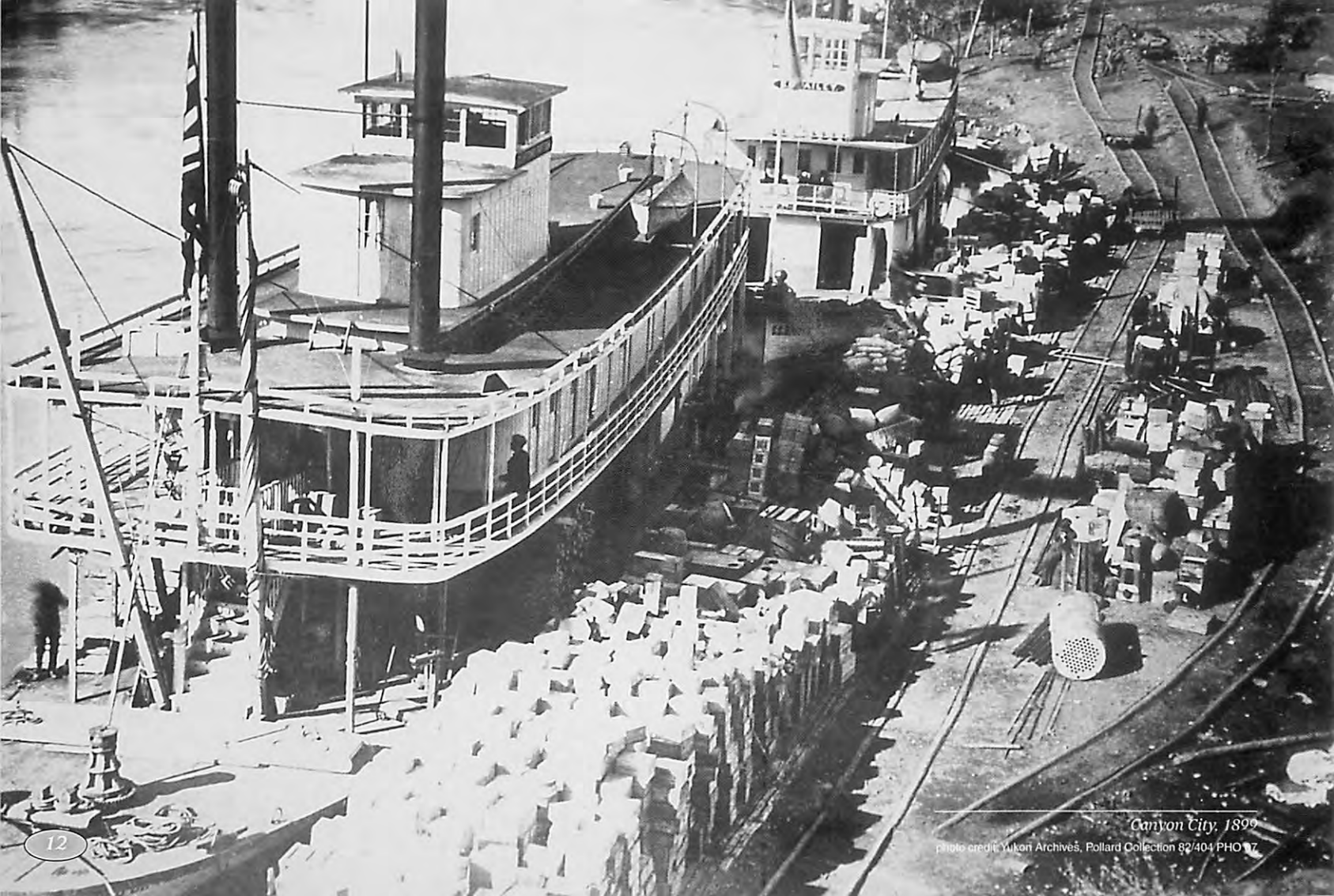


Over the next few years, the number of prospectors to the Yukon increased slowly and steadily. By 1884, nearly 300 prospectors had made the trek over the Chilkoot Pass to explore the tributaries of the Yukon River and test the gravels for gold.

In 1885, Lieutenant Frederick Swatka of the U.S. Army led a military reconnaissance of the Yukon, the first organized expedition through the pass to the upper Yukon River. When he passed by the canyon, Swatka noted that local Indians and the early prospectors already had a well-established portage trail on the east bank of the river, where a number of trees had been cut and laid across the path to act as skids for boats and gear.

Above photo credit: Swatka1893:201, figure







# The 1887 Yukon Expedition

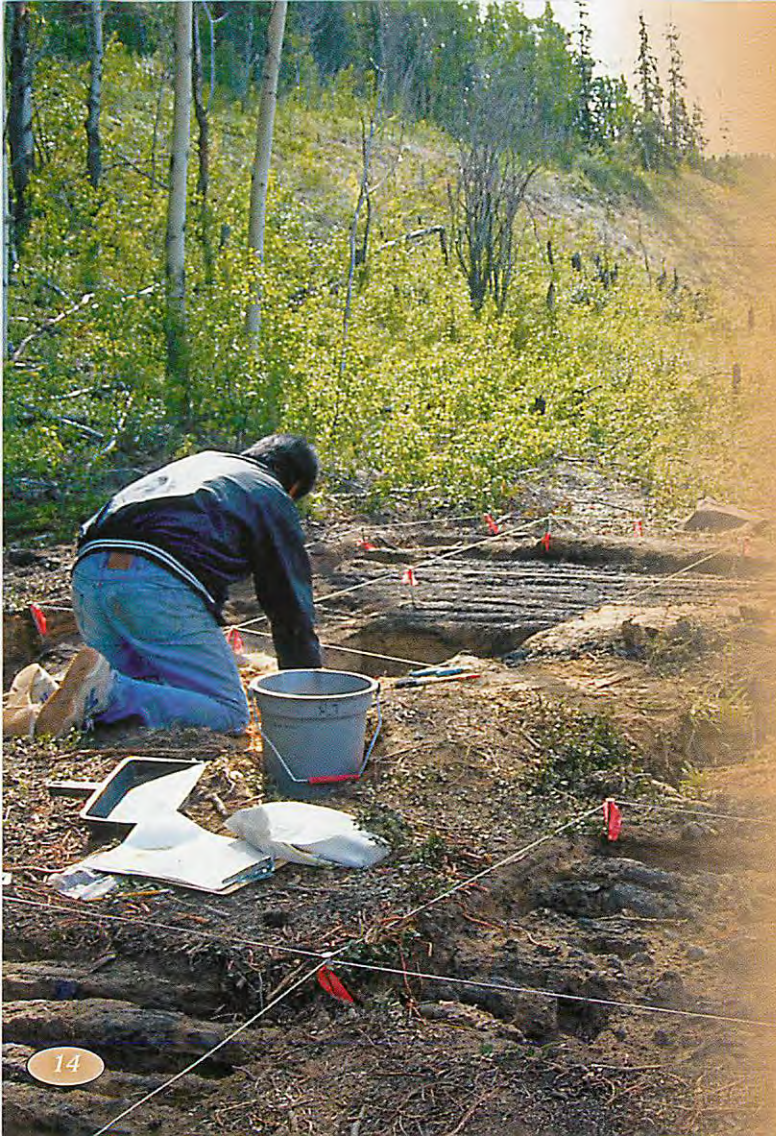
IN THE LATTER PART OF THE 1800S, THE UPPER YUKON RIVER WAS geographically part of Canada's Northwest Territories but it was a virtually unknown country to Canadians. Most of the early prospectors and traders were American and with Schwatka's military exploration of the river in 1883, the Yukon was falling increasingly under the influence of the United States. This was the setting when the Canadian government of the day sponsored the 1887 Yukon Expedition, under the leadership of George M. Dawson. A geologist by training, Dawson was a keen observer and ethnographer by inclination. His 1889 report on the expedition provided detailed accounts of the district's natural history and the valuable insights into the lives and lifestyles of First Nation people. It remains today as one of the cornerstones of Yukon exploration. George Dawson explored and mapped the remotest and wildest sections of the district and in 1887 he predicted to his friend William Ogilvie that one day someone would discover gold in the Yukon and "there'll be one of the biggest rushes the world has ever seen." George Dawson passed through Miles Canyon late in the summer of 1887 and noted the trails and portages constructed around the rapids by First Nations and early prospectors.



# Norman Macaulay

NORMAN MACAULAY WAS ONE OF THE YUKON'S FIRST BIG-TIME entrepreneurs. Originally from Victoria, Macaulay operated the trading post in Dyea before making the move to the Yukon in 1897. Quick to realize there was more money to be made providing services for stampeders than digging for gold, Macaulay offered travellers along the river food, liquor and lodging, and safe transit around the White Horse rapids. His operation at Canyon City was so successful that he talked of building a narrow gauge railway. This talk may have been one more way of increasing the value of his holdings. Macaulay cashed in his Canyon City chips in August 1899 when he sold the entire operation to an agent for the White Pass and Yukon Corporation for a reported \$185,000. He took his recent wealth five miles downriver to the new town of Whitehorse and built a large hotel and saloon which he operated for several years. Various sources report that Norman Macaulay also owned a lumber mill, a fox farm and several roadhouses.

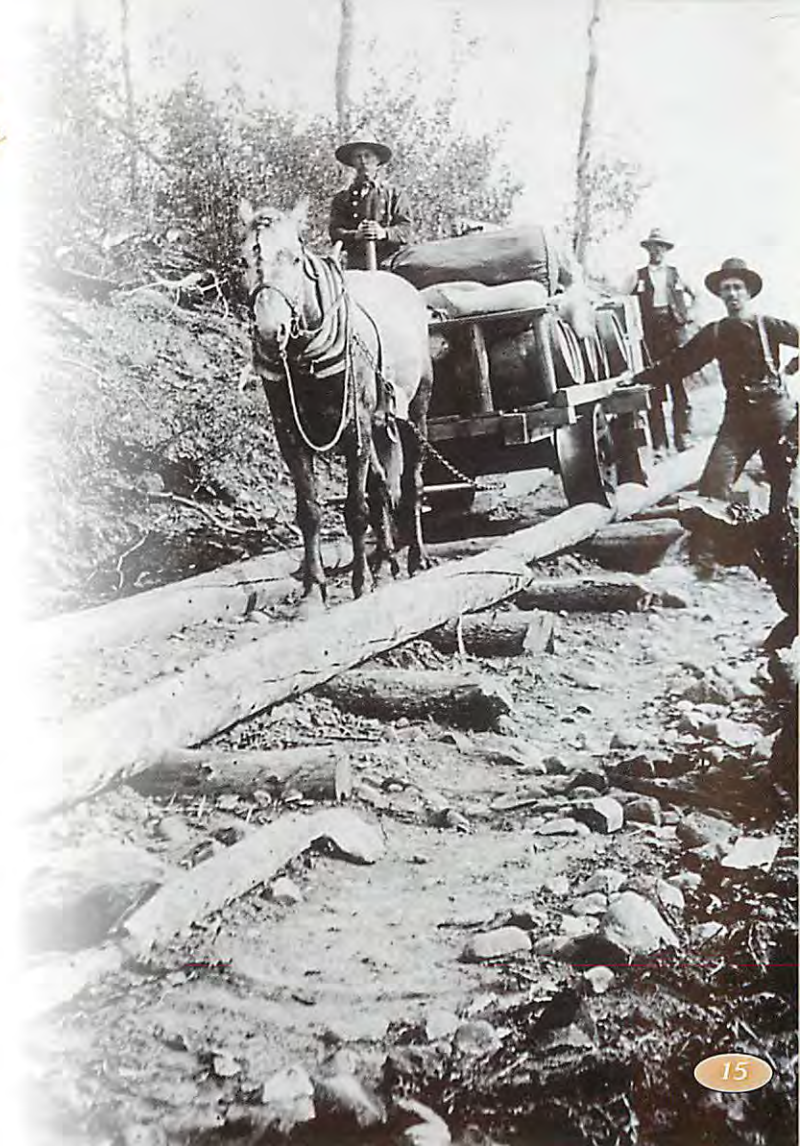
He managed the Royal Alexander Hotel in Dawson City and is listed as owning a hotel and saloon in Mayo in 1914-15. He left the territory shortly after this and died in 1919 at the age of 50 in Port Townsend, Washington.



# The golden age of Canyon City

With the discovery of gold in the Klondike in 1896, the number of travellers crossing the Chilkoot Pass and descending the Yukon River increased dramatically. By late 1897, tens of thousands of stampeders were on their way to the Klondike via the upper Yukon River.

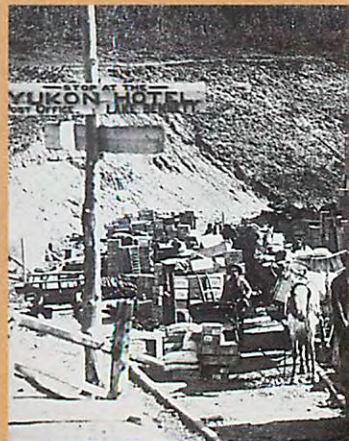
Sometime in the fall of 1897 Norman Macaulay, a 28-year-old merchant from Victoria, moved to the Yukon from Dyea and established a roadhouse/saloon at the beginning of the portage trail around Miles Canyon and White Horse rapids. Macaulay anticipated the human flood that was soon to break on the upper Yukon, and during that winter of 1897-98 he began construction of a wooden tramway on the east bank of the river. The tramway was only a crude track made of unmilled local logs but the scale of the project was monumental by the standards of the day. For five miles through the thick brush a line was cleared, a roadbed constructed and track laid. The feat was made even more remarkable because it was accomplished by a crew of eighteen men with horses in only three weeks. Short, rough tram cars with heavy cast-iron wheels were pulled along this simple track, usually by a single horse. Horses could be hooked in tandem for the steep hills or especially heavy loads. Macaulay's tramway and roadhouse formed the nucleus of the small isolated community of Canyon City.



# Sam Steele

*SUPERINTENDENT SAMUEL B. STEELE, THE MOST WELL KNOWN member of the Northwest Mounted Police in the Klondike Gold Rush, was famous for making up the law as he went along. The laws he made governing Miles Canyon had a profound effect on Canyon City.*

*Steele was on hand in May of 1898 when the ice went out at Lake Bennett, unleashing the vast, ragtag fleet of stampedeers' boats and rafts that had accumulated over the winter months. In the wake of that first mad rush, he travelled to Canyon City and witnessed first-hand the hazards and treachery of Miles Canyon and White Horse rapids. Steele immediately imposed a series of restrictions to control passage through canyon and rapids. He ruled that only qualified steersmen could steer the boats through the rapids, that no women or children were permitted in the boats and that all boats must have the necessary freeboard to ride the waves safely. He placed Corporal Edward Dixon in charge of day-to-day operations at the canyon. The restrictions put in place by Superintendent Steele forced most of the stampedeers to unload their scows at Canyon City and secure the services of a professional river pilot. These measures undoubtedly saved many lives and essentially guaranteed the success of Macaulay's tramline operation.*



Then, in the spring of 1898, the human tidal wave hit. Throughout the winter, thousands of stampeders from around the world had journeyed to Skagway and made the torturous trek from Dyea up the Chilkoot Pass to Bennett Lake. When Superintendent Sam Steele of the Northwest Mounted Police arrived at Bennett Lake in February 1898 he reported that 7,000 men were camped at the site, awaiting the spring break-up of the river ice.

This was only the beginning. In that first frantic year of the Klondike Gold Rush more than 28,000 men and women came over the Chilkoot Pass and down the Yukon River. The major navigational obstacle along the way was Miles Canyon and the White Horse rapids. Hundreds of handmade rafts and scows were lost in these waters in the first few weeks of the rush. Macaulay's tramline offered an alternative to the mayhem—almost overnight Canyon City was born.

The Canyon and White Horse rapids Tramway Company transported freight and smaller boats around the canyon and rapids for the princely sum of three cents a pound and \$25 a boat. At the peak of its operation, Macaulay's "freight hustlers" and 23 horses were working around the clock, moving between 70 and 90 tons of freight a day.



# Sternwheelers

STERNWHEELERS BEGAN TO PLY THE UPPER YUKON RIVER AS EARLY AS 1898. These early boats were sledded over the Chilkoot Pass in pieces during the previous winter. Some of the first sternwheelers were the Bellingham, the A.J. Goddard and the J.H. Kilbourne. These steam powered vessels were assembled at Bennett but could only run the headwaters of the Yukon River as far as Miles Canyon. Boats could be carefully guided through the canyon but it was a one-way trip; it was impossible to get back up against the raging current. Another fleet of sternwheelers served the down-river side of the canyon, running from Whitehorse to Dawson and beyond to St. Michaels, Alaska. Boats on the upper river tended to be shorter and narrower than those on the Lower Yukon and many had only a single stack. The entire journey from Bennett to Dawson City could be completed by sternwheeler in under five days and cost \$75.



*Opposite.* The M.V. Schwatka passes by the Canyon City site.

Above, photo credit: Yukon Archives, E.A. Hegg (University of Washington) Collection. #2695

Left, photo credit: MacBride Museum Collection, Yukon Archives. 3609





By the summer of 1898, Canyon City boasted a hotel, saloon, restaurant, store, stables, machine shop, Northwest Mounted Police Post, cabins and numerous tents. Few people stayed long — after all, their destination was the goldfields of the Klondike — nevertheless Canyon City was one of the busiest spots in the Yukon. Hundreds of people a day made the journey around the canyon and rapids while hundreds more waited their turns at the Canyon City saloon, playing cards and spinning tales of adventure.

Macaulay's tramline was so successful that he intended to convert it to a narrow gauge railway in 1899. But it was a race against time: fellow Victoria businessman John Hepburn constructed a competing tramway on the opposite bank of the river in the summer of 1898. Hepburn's tramline was short-lived, however. Macaulay bought out his competitor in June of 1899 for a reported \$60,000 and for a time operated both lines.

Meanwhile, construction of the White Pass and Yukon Railway from Alaskan coast to the railhead at the foot of White Horse rapids was nearing completion. Begun in Skagway in May of 1898, the railway reached Lake Bennett by July 6, 1899. The White Pass and Yukon Corporation wanted exclusive control of the route to the Klondike, and so in August 1899 it purchased both tramlines from Macaulay for the seemingly exorbitant sum of \$185,000.

In June, 1900 the last link in the railway between Caribou Crossing and the newly created townsite of Whitehorse was completed. This signalled the end of the tramway: Within a few years, Canyon City was abandoned and the settlement was relegated to the pages of Yukon history, having existed only for the peak years of the Klondike Gold Rush.



# After the Gold Rush

Very little is known about Canyon City after the tramlines ceased operations in 1900. What began as a single industry company town based on transportation around the canyon, quickly became obsolete. With the construction of the White Pass railway there was little incentive for people to stay around.

There are no records surrounding the abandonment of Canyon City. Some reports say the settlement was closed down immediately after completion of the rail link between Whitehorse and Skagway. But NWMP daily journal records indicate that the Canyon City detachment was still active until at least October, 1901. And from these records it appears that the tramline may still have been used to transfer freight around the canyon and rapids well after the railway reached Whitehorse



*Right, Scows await unloading at Canyon City*

Above, photo credit: Yukon Archives, E.A. Hegg Collection, #2583

Right, photo credit: Yukon Archives, Vancouver Public Library Collection #1996



## East Cabin

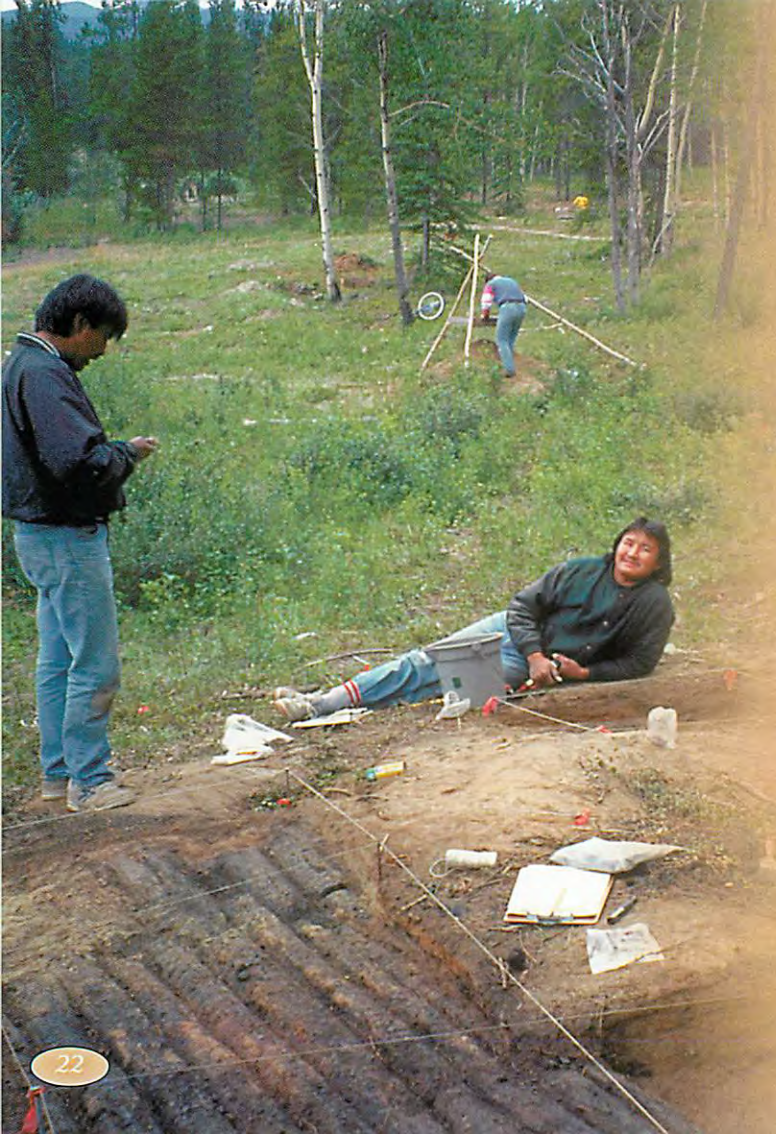
In 1995, shovel tests at the east end of town, near the base of the slope, revealed the remains of a previously unknown small, log cabin, which had completely been destroyed by fire. Although a calamity for the original occupants, the event was a fortunate one for archaeologists: all of the evidence of everyday life at Canyon City was captured by the blaze. Though charred, or melted and deformed, the artifacts were preserved nonetheless to capture a moment in time from the Gold Rush.

Excavation of the cabin revealed a variety of household and personal items including tin tableware, Levi-Strauss buttons from trousers, "Mother of Pearl" shirt buttons, a hair pin, a hair dye bottle and furniture hardware. The absence of exotic or luxury goods completes the picture of the mundane and utilitarian nature of life at Canyon City during Gold Rush times.

Perhaps the one extravagance was the cabin itself as everyone at Canyon City appears to have lived in canvas wall tents. An archival photo has been located which shows the cabin built on a prominent platform surrounded by a wooden fence. All of this evidence suggests the owner of the cabin was an important person at Canyon City—a foreman, a manager or perhaps even the owner of the tramway himself, Norman Macaulay.

*Left, Kwanlin Dün field assistants Henry Taylor and Jerry Taylor uncover the well preserved remains of a collapsed cabin at the east end of Canyon City.*

*Above, Household items, like these bottles and cans, caught in the fire of the East Cabin are now significant artifacts*



Sternwheelers and scows did continue to pull into Canyon City for inspection and clearance after the rail link to Whitehorse was completed. By 1900, it appears that sternwheelers such as the *S.S. Olive May*, *S.S. Kilbourne*, *S. S. Nora* and *S.S. Clifford Sifton* were routinely docking at Canyon City, delivering passengers and freight, and towing scows bound for Whitehorse, Dawson and posts such as Lower Laberge and Big Salmon. It is not recorded when the NWMP post at Canyon City was closed or when the townsite was finally abandoned.

Archaeological excavations at the site indicate that most of the principal structures at Canyon City were dismantled and removed, probably to the new townsite of Whitehorse. The one exception to this is a small cabin at the east end of town.

There is evidence that at least one First Nation family returned to Canyon City after the Gold Rush. A 1906 news item from the Whitehorse Star reported that an elderly native woman, Mrs. John, died at her home at Canyon City and that the body was to be taken by dogsled to Marsh Lake for burial. Aside from this one tantalizing reference there is little other evidence of any occupation at Canyon City this century. The construction of a water control device at the outlet of Marsh Lake in 1925 likely caused the collapse of native fisheries on the upper Yukon River. Interviews of local elders conducted by Kwanlin Dün indicate that people continued to use the Yukon River above Miles Canyon as a resource area but there was little information specific to Canyon City or a salmon fishery in the area after the Gold Rush.



# Machine Shop

THE MACHINE SHOP OR BLACKSMITH SHOP WAS PROBABLY ONE OF the most important structures at Canyon City, yet there is no mention of such a shop in historic writings of the town.

Discovered by shovel testing, tucked away in the back of the townsite, the machine shop yielded parts of a small forge, large volumes of coke and slag, rusted chisels, homemade tools, and literally thousands of bits and pieces of iron, all remnants of once-intensive machining activities. Hundreds of fragmented horseshoe nails, an ox shoe and a horseshoe also tell us this was where the town's farrier worked, maintaining the shoes on working animals.

Numerous artifacts from the Machine Shop indicate that recycling materials for other uses was routine and if special tools or replacement parts were needed, they had to be manufactured on the spot. Far from centres of supply, the former inhabitants of Canyon City were models of economy, innovation and self-reliance.



JOUR 6  
CANYON CITY  
MACHINE SHOP  
LOG & BRUSH  
FEATURES  
08 06 07

# Canyon Hotel & Saloon

LOW, NEARLY INVISIBLE BERMS IN THE GROUND ARE ALL THAT REMAIN today of the once thriving Canyon Hotel and Saloon. It was here that thousands of stampedeers quenched their thirst, filled their bellies and rested their weary bodies on the journey to the Klondike Gold Fields.

Archaeological excavations unearthed the remains of former revelries at the roadhouse: thousands of liquor and beer bottle fragments and lead foil wrappers attest to both the amount of alcohol consumed and the favoured brands. Rye and Scotch appear to have been the most popular libation, sold at fifty cents a glass. Poker chips, gold nuggets and old coins are the lost currency of games of chance, recovered by archaeologists where they had fallen through the cracks of the floor. Simple meals, based heavily on canned fare, were served at the roadhouse. Careless diners contributed cutlery, glass and enamel tableware to the archaeological record.



Right, Poker chips that fell between the floorboards of the saloon were discovered 100 years later.

Above, photo credit: Goetzman photo. 044 Special Collections Division. University of Washington Libraries. Neg. No 11585





# Terminus of the Tramway

MACAULAY'S 5.5 MILE TRAMLINE ENDED APPROXIMATELY WHERE THE Robert Campbell Bridge sits today. At the end of this tramline, steamers would dock and boats would arrive to reload the tram-transported freight and continue on their journey to Dawson City. At this time, the town of Whitehorse had yet to be developed and Canyon City was the principal community in the area.

This was soon to change with the construction of the rail link to Skagway and the White Pass and Yukon Route Company's decision to terminate their railway on the west bank of the river at the foot of the White Horse rapids. The company quickly surveyed a townsite in October 1899 and at the time named it Closeleigh after the Close Brothers in England, major investors in the railway. It was soon

clear that Closeleigh would be the new transportation hub in the area. At the insistence of Commissioner William Ogilvie, the name of the new boom town was changed to White Horse.



Above, The Landing of White Horse located at the terminus of the tram line, near the site of F.H. Collins High School today.

photo credit: H.C. Barley photo. MacBride Museum Collection. Yukon Archives. 4114

Opposite, Andrea Hoyt and Kerry Huff savour the excitement of discovering a stone tool at Canyon City.





## One hundred years later

One hundred years after Norman Macaulay first eyed the economic potential of a route around the infamous Miles Canyon and White Horse rapids, bustling activity finally returns to the town he created. For two months each summer, archaeologists and students descend on the site of Canyon City, establish gridlines, uncover and measure building outlines and dig perfectly square holes in the ground.

They are digging into the past in an attempt to understand the unwritten history of Canyon City; the tiny details of life in a Gold Rush town that escaped the gaze of historians and authors, details that speak to the condition of the common man or woman. What did they eat, how did they spend their evenings, what motivated them to stay, or leave? And what of the time before the Gold Rush? First Nation hunters and fishers stopped frequently at this site — why? How can we make sense of the traces they left behind?



*Above, Currency of the Gold Rush – A variety of Canadian and American coins were recovered at Canyon City and at least one unlucky traveller dropped a gold nugget. From left to right, an 1894 United States of America half dollar; an 1854 Bank of Upper Canada half-penny bank token; an 1891 Canadian ten cent piece and a gold nugget.*



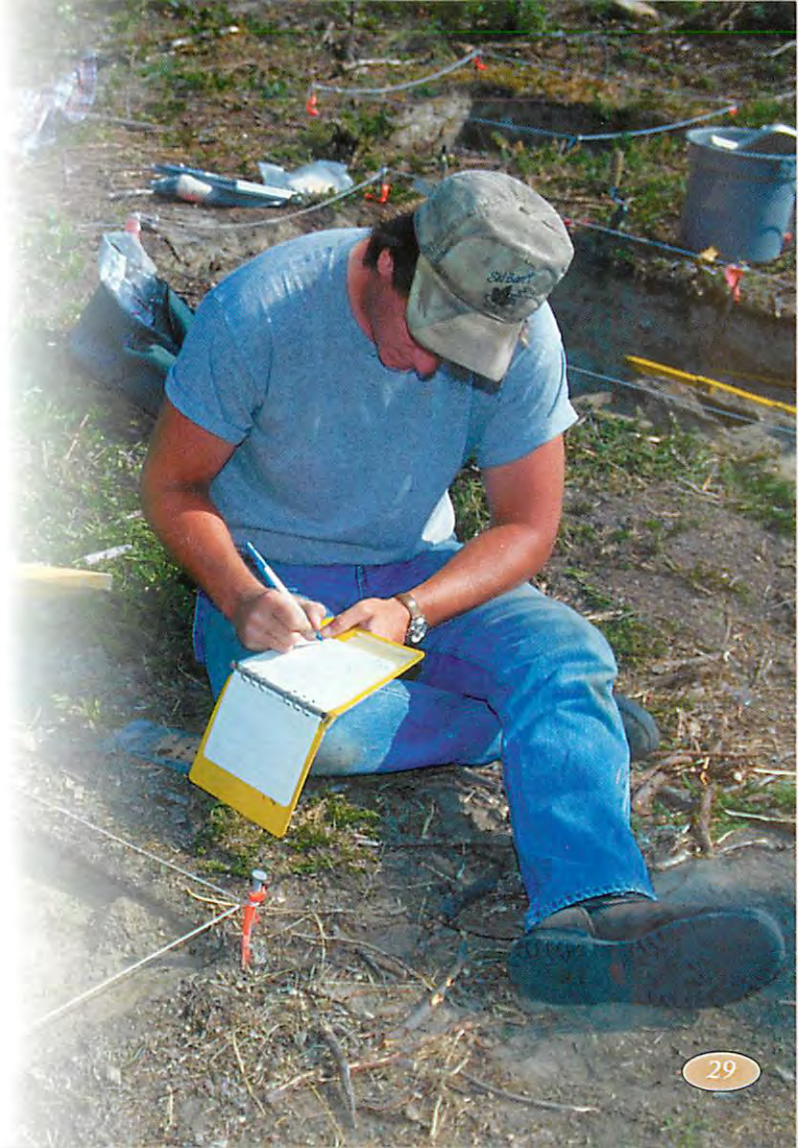
One of the most attractive aspects of the archaeology at Canyon City is the absence of obvious development or re-use of the site over the past 100 years. Many artifacts lie where they were abandoned almost a century ago. Tin cans and broken bottles scattered near the location of the roadhouse were used and discarded by the original stamperders.

To an archaeologist, Canyon City represents a snapshot of the past: it offers a glimpse of the Klondike Gold Rush frozen in time. And beneath these historic layers lie the traces of what went before — the First Nation fishing and hunting camps.

Today, Canyon City is a popular hiking destination, fishing spot and heritage site. Since the interpretive program was begun in 1994, more than 5,000 people have visited the site — a faint echo of a century-old stampede.



*Above, Large skin scrapers were used for working hides at Canyon City.*



# Northwest Mounted Police Post

ONE OF THE PRIMARY GOALS OF ARCHAEOLOGY AT CANYON CITY was to retrieve information on the former structures and features at the site, and to discover through the material remains, how people lived during the Gold Rush at towns like Canyon City. Investigations at the Northwest Mounted Police post provided valuable insights for both inquiries. Careful troweling exposed the remnants of the floor and sill logs of the post, revealing that it was a small building divided into three rooms. Archival sources report that these rooms served as a jailhouse, a telegraph office, and living quarters for the two officers stationed at Canyon City, who took their meals at the roadhouse.

While domestic artifacts are largely absent, a brass button polisher lost beneath the building reveals that the NWMP maintained their sense of decorum even in remote outposts in the Yukon. Excavations also showed that the building was destroyed by fire sometime after it was abandoned; in places only a red staining in the soil marks the location of the post.



Left, Henry Taylor documents the faint traces of burned floorboards from the NWMP post. Above, A variety of artifacts from the NWMP post. The unusual artifact on top is a brass button polisher.

# Tin can middens

THOUSANDS OF RUSTY TIN CANS LAY SCATTERED AMONG THE lodgepole pine and white spruce behind the Canyon Hotel and Saloon. For most people, old tin cans hold little allure, but there are some striking differences between the tins we use today and those of the Gold Rush.

At the turn of the century, cans were soldered together with lead, the food inside was heated to boiling and then a final tab of metal was soldered in place to hermetically seal the contents. These early containers were airtight, but the food inside was in constant contact with both the tin and the lead solder. Today's cans have a thin rubber-like coating and are vacuum packed.

The sheer abundance of tin cans at Canyon City show how much resident workers relied on imported foods for their day-to-

day meals. Some bones of wild game such as moose or caribou were found at the site but it appears that imported meat of beef and pork was more common. Curiously, one bone found at Canyon City was from a domestic goat!



A photograph of a forest path. In the foreground, a wooden log barrier is partially visible. A red ribbon is tied to a tree trunk on the left. The path leads into a dense forest of evergreen trees. The right side of the image is a solid tan color with white text.

## *Fox farm?*

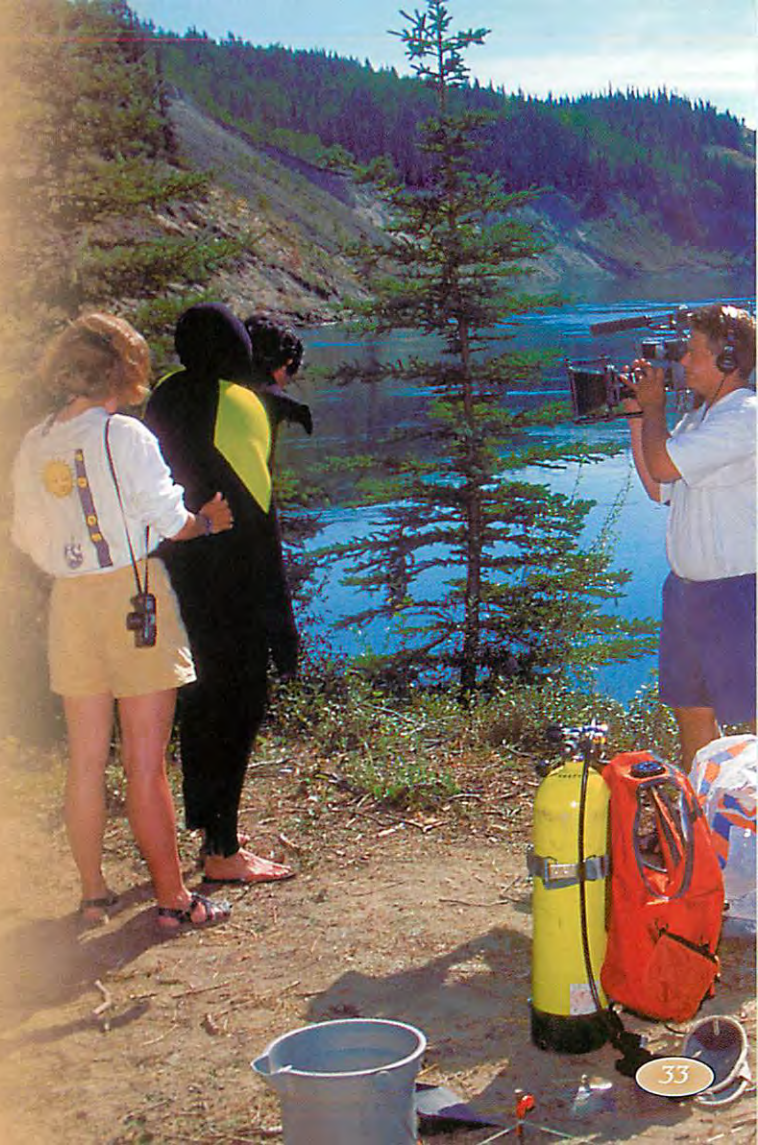
ONE OF THE UNSOLVED MYSTERIES AT CANYON CITY WAS A COLLECTION of wire mesh pens located among the trees at the far east end of town. The pens, most of which included subterranean, log-lined enclosures, may be related to fox farming activities which were common in southern Yukon in the 1910s and 1920s. There were 17 known fox farms operating in the Whitehorse area at the time. After 1920 fox farms were generally replaced by mink farms, which persisted through the 1930s. If this interpretation is correct, the wire mesh pens post-date the Gold Rush occupation of Canyon City, and represent the only significant reuse of the area.

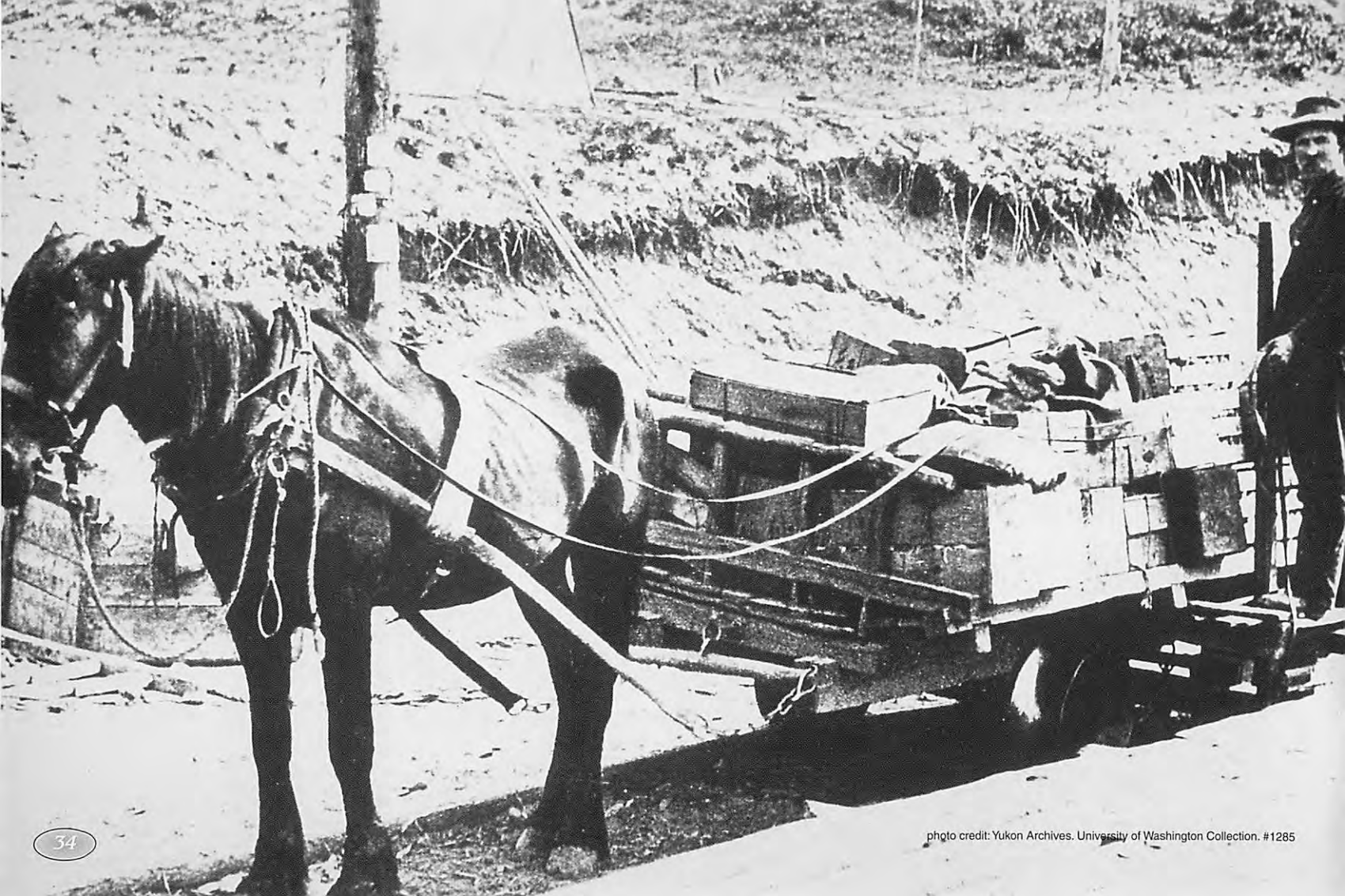
# Underwater Discoveries

THE HISTORIC SHORELINE OF CANYON CITY WAS ALTERED RADICALLY when the Whitehorse hydro dam was built in 1959 and water levels at the site rose an estimated 2.5-4 metres. Volunteer members of the Yukon Underwater Divers Association investigated the old shoreline and reported that large sections of the dock and parts of the tramway itself were still visible below the water. A number of historic artifacts of Gold Rush vintage were collected from on top of and below the submerged dock. These artifacts were unusually well preserved compared to similar artifacts found on land and included several forks, an oar lock, numerous ceramic fragments, numerous bottle fragments and a number of brass objects. The wharf itself was made of wood and stone — the stone having been laboriously quarried from nearby basalt outcrops.



Above, photo credit: Yukon Archives, M. Marsh Collection, 77/33 PHO 068 #87





**Yukon**  
Tourism  
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