

WHITE PASS AND YUKON ROUTE RAILWAY
An Historical Survey

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Historical Overview

For centuries, the Tlingit Indians of Southeastern Alaska were the only travellers over the passes leading from the Pacific to the interior of the Yukon. They guarded the passes, in fact, and would not let others cross. Increasingly, however, prospectors from southeastern Alaska agitated for access to the Yukon, where gold was found in the 1870s. With the support of an armed naval delegation, a party of miners crossed the Chilkoot Pass in May of 1880 and paid the Indians to pack to the headwaters of the Yukon. As news of further Yukon gold discoveries spread in the 1880s, more and more miners came through the passes. Since the Chilkoots still retained some control over the defile, packing became quite a profitable business for them.¹

One who prospected in the Yukon in 1886 was the son of Captain William Moore. On his return from the Forty Mile area, Billie Moore told his father how great he felt Yukon's mineral potential was. Based on this information, Captain Moore predicted as early as 1886 that there would be a gold rush to the Yukon. He also predicted that there would be great gains for those who transported the stampedees to the goldfields. He was the first to stake a homestead at Skagway, in the hope it would become the major port for people and equipment headed north to Yukon's mineral riches.

Moore's biggest problem was that the only known pass in the area was the Chilkoot, which was still effectively under the control of the Chilkoot Indians. Although he knew something of another pass, the Chilkoots kept its precise location a secret. His son Billie had learned of this route from Skookum Jim, who was to become one of the earliest discoverers of gold in the Klondike. After much persuading, Skookum Jim revealed the White Pass route to Captain Moore.² Now Moore felt he had what he needed to make Skagway a truly great port and gateway to the Yukon.

Moore spent the next eight years trying to convince financiers to back his scheme.³ Unfortunately, he had neglected to register his homestead claim so

¹ Allen A. Wright, *Prelude to Bonanza* (Sydney, B.C., 1976), p. 137.

² Roy Minter, *The White Pass: Gateway to the Klondike* (Toronto, 1987), pp. 23-24.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

that when the rush for gold began, Moore's townsite plans were shattered by the stampede of people and companies vying to build a town and a transportation system through the pass.

There were many proposals for reaching the Klondike. These ranged from simple trails to wagon roads, tramlines and railways. In 1898 there were some twenty-one companies attempting to build railways.⁴ The proposed routes varied. Many favoured an all-Canadian route. This idea was particular supported by interests close to the Canadian government.⁵

The intricate political and economic machinations that finally resulted in one group getting a charter to build a railway were complex. The result, however, was that a syndicate, financed and supervised by Close Brothers and Company of England, finally began construction of a railway from the port of Skagway on June 15, 1898.⁶ In order to build the railway, the financiers had to get permission from three different governments. The charter that granted the right to build a railway was a different matter from acquiring the land grants needed for construction.

Once building began, the builders had to confront sheer granite cliffs and a short building season. To worsen matters, the confidence of the financiers continually flagged in the face of competition from existing roads and tramlines through both the Chilkoot and White passes. The backers were also disconcerted by the high price of building in the remote north. Considering this, and the high labour turnover on the line, the railway was built quickly. This was largely the result of taking some short cuts in construction and some chances on the weather, but it was all necessary to outflank the competing transportation interests and bolster the confidence of the British backers.

Although the initial target of the railway had been Fort Selkirk, the related distance, time and expense soon changed the destination to Whitehorse, head of river navigation for the river sternwheelers. The backers of the railway wanted to see some return on their investment before they would venture more capital. This meant completing a section of the rail and getting it in operation immediately to show a profit. The logic of this was simple: the more profit the line made, the more investment capital it would likely receive.

The railway was built in sections, with each put into operation as soon as its tracks were laid. The first major goal was the White Pass Summit. The railway earned its first profit on this section by transporting the equipment of the Stampeders to the top of the pass. This section of the line was so successful, in fact, that the syndicate was able to buy out competitors who

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97.

⁵ Gordon Bennett, *Yukon Transportation: A History* (Ottawa, 1978), p. 24.

⁶ Minter, *The White Pass*, p. 188.

were operating a Chilkoot Pass tramline. Their confidence grew and the next section to Bennett Lake was financed without difficulty. This was completed on July 6, 1899, a little over a year from the time the first grades were surveyed in Skagway.⁷

The next section to be built extended from Bennett Lake to Carcross. This entailed a great deal of cutting through granite, which slowed the work. The builders decided to build the section from Carcross to Whitehorse at the same time as they were blasting through the rock along Bennett Lake. Since it was much easier going, the Whitehorse section could be built more quickly and be completed by the time the rails reached Carcross from Bennett. Rail equipment and stamperders' grubstakes were then transported to Bennett by rail and freighted down the lake in barges to Carcross, thereby rapidly extending the capabilities of the transportation system and increasing the speed with which the Whitehorse stretch could be built.

At this time, one of the Close Brothers visited the construction sites. He was so impressed with the freighting possibilities and the mineral potential of Whitehorse's Copper Belt that he immediately authorized the construction of this second section from Carcross to Whitehorse.⁸

Construction of the Yukon portion of the railway began on August 24, 1899 with 500 men and 100 teams of horses.⁹ Compared to the difficulty of building through the rugged mountains while fighting the heavy snow of the Skagway to Bennett section, construction from Carcross to Whitehorse was relatively easy. The only engineering feats were dealing with the permafrost, which was overcome by treating it like rock and blasting it, and the accidental draining of Lewes Lake. The last spike of this section was driven in Whitehorse on July 8, 1900.¹⁰

With the completion of the railway a certainty, the company consolidated its position by buying out the tramlines that bypassed the rapids in Whitehorse. They also bought out the ships of the Canadian Pacific Navigation Company and thereby assumed control of most of the commercial vessels on the Yukon River and Taku Arm.¹¹ Finally, they bought out the company hauling mail and freight over the winter ice to Dawson City and soon built a road to improve the route. They now had an uninterrupted transportation link from tidewater to the goldfields. With the establishment of the new river division

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 310.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 320.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 322.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 350.

of the company, there seemed no need to continue to the original destination of Fort Selkirk, so plans to continue the rail past Whitehorse were shelved.

As mineral extraction was the basis of the Yukon economy from the beginning, the fortunes of the White Pass and Yukon Route followed the rise and fall of the mineral markets. With the export of gold from the Klondike in full swing and the copper ore around Whitehorse commanding a good price, the railway is alleged to have recovered its construction costs in the first year of its operation. Even after the end of this peak period, the railway ran three trains per day in summer and six per week in winter.¹² When mining activity slumped in the 1930s, White Pass became virtually dependent on tourism to stay afloat.

At the same time, the rise and fall of the Territory's fortunes was closely linked to operation of the railway. The great influx of people during the gold rush required a reliable link with the outside to meet the demand for both necessities and luxuries. Once the railway was completed, a larger population could be supported. Without this efficient transportation system, many people would not have remained after the initial rush played out.

Once White Pass and Yukon Route had a virtual monopoly on transportation in Yukon, however, the fate of many mines and communities was dependent on it and the freight prices it set. The high rates charged by White Pass played no small part in forcing many mining operations to close. The effect of these transport rates was to reduce the development and investment potential in Yukon to such a degree that in 1911 the Dominion Government actually ordered the company to reduce its freight rates.¹³

While the interwar years were slow for the railway, it did play an important role in encouraging tourism in Yukon. The trip from Skagway to Carcross, thence by boat to Ben My Chree, was so popular that it became the mainstay of the railway during this period. With the closure of the major gold and silver mines in the 1930s and '40s, the railway suffered even more. During World War II the American army took over the already dilapidated railway line, used it for wartime purposes, and returned it in even worse condition to its owners in 1946.¹⁴

In 1951 this situation was rectified by a major reorganization under the supervision of Norman D'Arcy. As head of the railway, he replaced aging equipment and many of the original buildings. The railway then operated at a profit for some twenty years. The completion of an all-season road to the ocean, however, seems to have sounded the death knell for the railway which had played so important a role in shaping Yukon.

¹² Bennett, *Yukon Transportation*, p. 69.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

Themes

The White Pass and Yukon Route Railway played an important role in opening up and maintaining the economy of the Yukon for some eighty years. The story of the conception and construction of the White Pass is full of economic and political intrigues, which took place in Skagway, Ottawa, Victoria and London. The line is also famous for the incredible feats of engineering and human endurance needed to build it. These events took place mostly in Alaska and British Columbia.

The most evident feature of the White Pass Railway in the Yukon is its rail-to-lake, rail-to-river, and rail-to-road and trail relationships. In examining resources related to the railway, one must also look at those sites and features which tied the railway to the other modes of transportation. Of course this would exclude anything solely related to the river or road operations. Still, "Transportation/land/rail" remains the main theme of concern.

A second theme area which would bear examination is "Settlement and Community Development," since Carcross and Whitehorse show a definite split between rail and water orientations.

Known Sites

The most obvious place to begin examining railway resources is at the end of steel. But Whitehorse was more concerned with the management of the river division, the Overland Trail and, later, the trucking and highway divisions than it was with the affairs of the railway. Most railway administration took place in Skagway.

Still, as a terminus and transfer point Whitehorse retains a great deal of significance in the history of the railway. The major features here include the railway station, administrative offices, transfer facilities (including the wharf and Utah Transfer), and the yards. The major repair and maintenance operations and roundhouse are gone from Whitehorse. One may also include the Macauley and Hepburn tramlines in this inventory of related resources, as they represent an early form of rail transportation and an obstacle, albeit minor, which the railway had to overcome to reach Whitehorse.

Carcross has unique set of railway resources. Besides the station, the wharf and warehouse represent the transition from rail to lake travel for both

freight and passengers. The swing bridge is the only one of its kind on this line and indeed it is the most northerly of its kind on the continent.¹⁵

Two resources which are strictly neither artifact nor structure are the *Duchess* locomotive from the Taku Tramline, and the *Royal Mail* coach that carried mail from the end of steel to its destination. Other features include the tie plant and, of course, the point at which the last spike was driven.

There may be remains of some of the road camps and shelters along the more isolated parts of the line. According to the early pamphlets and maps produced by the company, there were eleven stops in Yukon outside of Carcross and Whitehorse in 1904 (see Figure 1) and still seven in the 1920s. Early accounts also note facilities at Canyon and Ear Lake near Whitehorse.

Figure 1: 1904 White Pass and Yukon Route Stops in the Yukon

Dundalk	Robinson
Watson	Cowley
Carcross	Dugdale
Lansdowne	Wigan
Lorne	Junction
Minto	Whitehorse
DeWette	

By 1950, however, there were structures only at Lorne and Cowley.¹⁶

At last check (1984), there were remains of the tool shed at Cowley but nothing at Lorne. A somewhat more loosely related resource is the Robinson Roadhouse, which served those jumping off the train and heading for the Wheaton River country. The actual "station" at Robinson was a Tunerville Trolley which is no longer extant.

In addition to these sites, there are the landscape features of the railbed and track itself. In this category one may wish to include the cuts, fills and the engineering error at Lewes Lake as features of the railway's construction history.

Another engineering and structural aspect of the railway is its bridges. Historic rolling stock may also be included in the list of historic resources associated with the railway.

¹⁵ White Pass and Yukon Route, *Alaska and Yukon Territory* (n.p., 1914).

¹⁶ White Pass and Yukon Corporation, "Property and Equipment Re: Assessment, 1949-51," Whitehorse, 1952.

A Comment on Sources

Secondary sources on the history of the White Pass and Yukon Route deal mainly with the construction period and the major features of the railway. There is almost nothing in these sources about the minor stops along the line or the maintenance of and changes to the resources that took place over the years. Fortunately, the corporate records are available, if widely distributed, as are many individuals who worked on the railway. Some of this more obscure information may be obtained from those sources.

Following is a select bibliography of some readily-available sources that deal directly with the history or physical resources of the railway. Some of the diary and narrative items were reviewed to get an idea of what this type of reference might yield in terms of physical resource descriptions. With the exception of the major stops, the diaries lack information on stations and other railway facilities.

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